

Women Who Love Too Much

Robin Norwood

WOMEN WHO LOVE TOO MUCH

When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll
Change

Robin Norwood

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“If you constantly find yourself loving men you want to change, **WOMEN WHO LOVE TOO MUCH** is for you.”

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- *Star Publications*

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Women Who Love Too Much

Letters from Women Who Love Too Much

Daily Meditations for Women Who Love Too Much

(*illustrated by Richard Torregrossa*)

WHY: A Guide to Answering Life’s Toughest Questions

WOMEN WHO LOVE TOO MUCH

When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll
Change

Robin Norwood

Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin

a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

New York

JEREMY P. TARCHER/PENGUIN

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York
10014, USA Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700,
Toronto,

Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R ORL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of
Penguin Books Ltd)

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3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi- 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R ORL, England

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Published simultaneously in Canada

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Street, New York, NY 10014.

ISBN : 978-1-101-22241-6

<http://us.penguin.com>

Version_4

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Peele quote excerpted from a broadcast over University of Minnesota Public Radio Station KUOM, “When Love Is

the Drug,” broadcast in 1983.

Acknowledgments

Laura Golden-Bellotti

Rereading my words, now a quarter of a century old, I feel again your guiding hand page by page. Your keen

editorial instincts and warm encouragement of a first-time author immeasurably boosted my confidence and

credibility. You polished this book so that it shines. Thank you, Laura.

Piper Norwood

To my darling daughter, best friend and now research assistant as well, deepest thanks from your computer-illiterate

mom (who *likes* being that way) for bringing the resources section into the twenty-first century. I couldn’t have done

it without you. Love and thanks to you, Piper.

Serafina Clarke and Brie Burkeman

With impeccable professionalism, exacting attention to detail, good humor, encouragement and friendship you've

represented me and my work while untying the Gordian knot, strand by strand. I'm grateful to be in such good

hands. Many thanks, ladies.

Everyone at Pocket Books

To all of you who over these many years have done your very best for me and this book, my deepest thanks. You're

a great team and I'm fortunate to have you doing all that you do on my behalf. Thanks, everybody.

My Readers

So many of you have written telling me how you've used this book to change the way you live. What a gift your

letters about your recovery have been. They've enriched my existence beyond measure. You're what it's all about.

My thanks to you.

Preface

When being in love means being in pain we are loving too much. When most of our conversations with intimate

friends are about *him*, *his* problems, *his* thoughts, *his* feelings—and nearly all our sentences begin with “*he . . .*”, we

are loving too much.

When we excuse his moodiness, bad temper, indifference, or put-downs as problems due to an unhappy childhood

and we try to become his therapist, we are loving too much.

When we read a self-help book and underline all the passages we think would help *him*, we are loving too much.

When we don't like many of his basic characteristics, values, and behaviors, but we put up with them thinking

that if we are only attractive and loving enough he'll want to change for us, we are loving too much.

When our relationship jeopardizes our emotional well-being and perhaps even our physical health and safety, we

are definitely loving too much.

In spite of all its pain and dissatisfaction, loving too much is such a common experience for many women that we

almost believe it is the way intimate relationships are supposed to be. Most of us have loved too much at least once

and for many of us it has been a recurrent theme in our lives. Some of us have become so obsessed with our partner

and our relationship that we are barely able to function.

In this book we will take a hard look at the reasons why so many women, looking for someone to love them, seem

inevitably to find unhealthy, unloving partners instead. And we will explore why, once we know a relationship is not

meeting our needs, we nevertheless have such difficulty ending it. We will see that loving turns into loving too much

when our partner is inappropriate, uncaring, or unavailable and yet we cannot give him up—in fact we want him, we

need him even more. We will come to understand how our wanting to love, our yearning for love, our loving itself

becomes an *addiction*.

Addiction is a frightening word. It conjures up images of heroin users jabbing needles into their arms and leading

obviously self-destructive lives. We don't like the word and we don't want to apply the concept to the way we relate

to men. But many, many of us have been "man junkies" and, like any other addict, we need to admit the severity of

our problem before we can begin to recover from it.

If you have ever found yourself obsessed with a man, you may have suspected that the root of that obsession was

not love but fear. We who love obsessively are full of fear—fear of being alone, fear of being unlovable and

unworthy, fear of being ignored or abandoned or destroyed. We give our love in the desperate hope that the man

with whom we're obsessed will take care of our fears. Instead, the fears—and our obsession—deepen until giving

love in order to get it back becomes a driving force in our lives. And because our strategy doesn't work we try, we

love even harder. We love too much.

I first recognized the phenomenon of "loving too much" as a specific syndrome of thoughts, feelings, and

behaviors after several years of counseling alcohol and drug abusers. Having conducted hundreds of interviews with

addicts and their families, I made a surprising discovery. Sometimes the chemically dependent patients I interviewed

grew up in troubled families, sometimes they did not; but their partners nearly always came from severely troubled

families in which they had experienced greater than normal stress and pain. By struggling to cope with their

addictive mates, these partners (known in the alcoholism treatment field as “co-alcoholics”) were unconsciously re-

creating and reliving significant aspects of their childhood.

It was mostly from the wives and girlfriends of addictive men that I began to understand the nature of loving too

much. Their personal histories revealed their need for both the superiority and the suffering they experienced in their

“savior” role and helped me make sense of the depth of their addiction to a man who was in turn addicted to a

substance. It was clear that both partners in these couples were equally in need of help, indeed that both were

literally dying of their addictions, he from the effects of chemical abuse, she from the effects of extreme stress.

These co-alcoholic women clarified for me the incredible power and influence their childhood experiences had on

their adult patterns of relating to men. They have something to tell all of us who have loved too much about why we

have developed our predilection for troubled relationships, how we perpetuate our problems, and most importantly

how we can change and get well.

I do not intend to imply that women are the only ones who love too much. Some men practice this obsession with

relationships with as much fervor as any woman could, and their feelings and behaviors issue from the same kinds

of childhood experiences and dynamics. However, most men who have been damaged in childhood do not develop

an addiction to relationships. Due to an interplay of cultural and biological factors, they usually try to protect

themselves and avoid their pain through pursuits which are more external than internal, more impersonal than

personal. Their tendency is to become obsessed with work, sports, or hobbies while, due to the cultural and

biological forces working on her, the woman's tendency is to become obsessed with a relationship—perhaps with

just such a damaged and distant man.

Hopefully this book will be of help to *anyone* who loves too much, but it is primarily written for women because

loving too much is primarily a female phenomenon. Its purpose is very specific: to help women with destructive

patterns of relating to men recognize that fact, understand the origin of those patterns, and gain the tools for

changing their lives.

But if you are a woman who loves too much, I feel it only fair to caution you that this is not going to be an easy

book to read. Indeed, if the definition fits and you nevertheless breeze through this book unstirred and unaffected, or

you find yourself bored or angry, or unable to concentrate on the material presented here, or only able to think about

how much it would help someone else, I suggest that you try reading the book again at a later time. We all need to

deny what is too painful or too threatening for us to accept. Denial is a natural means of self-protection, operating

automatically and unbidden. Perhaps at a later reading you will be able to face your own experiences and deeper

feelings.

Read slowly, allowing yourself to relate both intellectually and emotionally to these women and their stories. The

case histories in this book may seem extreme to you. I assure you that the opposite is true. The personalities,

characteristics, and histories that I have encountered among hundreds of women I have known personally and

professionally who fit the category of loving too much are by no means exaggerated here. Their actual stories are far

more complicated and full of pain. If their problems seem much more serious and distressing than yours, let me say

that your initial reaction is typical of most of my clients. Each believes that her problem is “not that bad,” even as

she relates with compassion to the plight of other women who, in her opinion, have “real” troubles.

It is one of the ironies of life that we women can respond with such sympathy and understanding to the pain in

one another's lives while remaining so blinded to (and by) the pain in our own. I know this only too well, having

been a woman who loved too much most of my life until the toll to my physical and emotional health was so severe

that I was forced to take a hard look at my pattern of relating to men. I have spent the last several years working hard

to change that pattern. They have been the most rewarding years of my life.

I hope that for all of you who love too much this book will not only help you to become more aware of the reality

of your condition, but will encourage you to begin to change it as well, by redirecting your loving attention away

from your obsession with a man and toward your own recovery and your own life.

Here a second warning is appropriate. There is in this book, as in so many "self-help" books, a list of steps to take

in order to change. Should you decide that you really do want to follow these steps, it will require—as all

therapeutic change does—years of work and nothing short of your total commitment. There are no shortcuts out of

the pattern of loving too much in which you are caught. It is a pattern learned early and practiced well, and to give it

up will be frightening, threatening, and constantly challenging. This warning is not meant to discourage you. After

all, you will most certainly be facing a struggle throughout those years ahead if you don't change your pattern of

relating. But in that case, your struggle will not be toward growth but merely toward survival. The choice is yours. If

you choose to begin the process of recovery, you will change from a woman who loves someone else so much it

hurts into a woman who loves herself enough to stop the pain.

Introduction

Beginning nearly a quarter of a century ago women have been turning to the book you hold in your hands for relief

from their pain regarding men and love. First in the United States and then throughout the world and in twenty-five

languages it has helped women in China and Brazil, France and Finland, Ireland and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Serbia

—women by the millions whose lives are linked across cultural, socio-economic, educational, and generational lines

by their need for help with loving too much.

Thankfully, attitudes have changed radically since *Women Who Love Too Much* first appeared. No longer

regarded as the natural, normal state of things, loving too much is now widely recognized as a dangerous and

debilitating condition. But that recognition has not been sufficient to halt the defining feelings and behaviors of this

obsession.

Trudi, whom you'll meet in chapter two and again in chapter eleven would no longer look or dress or even eat the

way she did in the mid-1980s when this book was first published—and she certainly wouldn't spend her summer

waiting at home by the phone for the call that never comes. Today's Trudi might even be able to acknowledge that

perhaps she has a problem with loving too much as she repeatedly checks her cell phone in hope of a message from

him, then e-mails or texts him with yet another desperate message of her own. Surface details in behavior may have

changed somewhat but the basic obsession is as strong as ever.

Why, if we now freely put a name to our problem, can't we overcome it? The damaged personality which is at the

root of loving too much hasn't the needed power to heal itself anymore than we can lift ourselves by our own

bootstraps. We must have help to change what is so deeply ingrained in our character and that is where this book

comes in. For those who *want* to change, it provides that help.

Pocket Books' new trade paperback edition of *Women Who Love Too Much*, now with an updated Sources of

Help appendix and an expanded Suggested Reading list, both validates and celebrates the proven track record as

well as the continuing relevance, immediacy, and efficacy of a message that has worked over time and around the

world. This book, with its stories specific to relationship addiction and its guidelines for recovery therefrom, has

enabled women everywhere to change their lives. Use it to help you change yours.

1

Loving the Man Who Doesn't Love Back

Victim of love,

I see a broken heart.

You've got your story to tell.

Victim of love,

It's such an easy part

And you know how to play it so well.

I think you know what I mean.

You're walking the wire

Of pain and desire,

Looking for love in between.

—“Victim of Love”

It was Jill's first session, and she looked doubtful. Pert and petite, with blond Orphan Annie curls, she sat stiffly on

the edge of the chair facing me. Everything about her seemed round: the shape of her face, her slightly plump figure,

and most particularly her blue eyes, which took in the framed degrees and certificates on my office wall. She asked a

few questions about my graduate school and counseling license, and then mentioned, with obvious pride, that she

was in law school.

There was a brief silence. She looked down at her folded hands.

“I guess I’d better start talking about why I’m here.” She spoke rapidly, using the momentum of her words to

gather courage.

“I’m doing this—seeing a therapist, I mean—because I’m really unhappy. It’s men, of course. I mean, me and

men. I always do something to drive them away. Everything starts out fine. They really pursue me and everything,

and then after they get to know me”—she tensed visibly against the coming pain—“it all falls apart.”

She looked up at me now, her eyes shining with held-back tears, and continued more slowly.

“I want to know what I’m doing wrong, what I have to change about me—because I’ll do it. I’ll do whatever it

takes. I’m really a hard worker.” She began to speed up again.

“It’s not that I’m unwilling. I just *don’t know* why this keeps happening to me. I’m afraid to get involved

anymore. I mean, it’s nothing but pain every time. I’m beginning to be really afraid of men.”

Shaking her head, the round curls bouncing, she explained with vehemence, “I don’t want that to happen, because

I’m very lonely. In law school I have lots of responsibility, and then I’m working to support myself, too. These

demands could keep me busy all the time. In fact, that’s pretty much all I did for the past year—work, go to school,

study, and sleep. But I missed having a man in my life.”

Quickly she continued. “Then I met Randy, when I was visiting friends in San Diego two months ago. He’s an

attorney, and we met one night when my friends took me out dancing. Well, we just hit it off right away. There was

so much to talk about—except that I guess I did most of the talking. But he seemed to like that. And it was just so

great to be with a man who was interested in things that were important to me, too.”

Her brows gathered together. “He seemed really attracted to me. You know, asking if I was married—I’m

divorced, have been for two years—if I lived alone. That kind of stuff.”

I could imagine how Jill’s eagerness must have shown as she chatted brightly with Randy over the blaring music

that first night. And the eagerness with which she welcomed him a week later when he extended a business trip to

Los Angeles an extra hundred miles to visit her. At dinner she offered to let him sleep at her apartment so that he

could postpone the long drive back until the next day. He accepted her invitation and their affair began that night.

“It was great. He let me cook for him and really enjoyed being looked after. I pressed his shirt for him before he

dressed that morning. I love looking after a man. We got along beautifully.” She smiled wistfully. But as she

continued her story it became clear that Jill had almost immediately become completely obsessed with Randy.

When he returned to his San Diego apartment, the phone was ringing. Jill warmly informed him that she had been

worried about his long drive and was relieved to know he was safely home. When she thought he sounded a little

bemused at her call, she apologized for bothering him and hung up, but a gnawing discomfort began to grow in her,

fueled by the awareness that once again she cared far more than the man in her life did.

“Randy told me once not to pressure him or he would just disappear. I got so scared. It was all up to me. I was

supposed to love him and leave him alone at the same time. I couldn’t do it, so I just got more and more scared. The

more I panicked, the more I chased him.”

Soon Jill was calling him almost nightly. Their arrangement was to take turns calling, but often when it was

Randy’s turn the hour would grow late and she would become too restless to stand it. Sleep was out of the question

anyway, so she would dial him. These conversations were as vague as they were lengthy.

“He would say he’d forgotten, and I would say, ‘How can you forget?’ After all, I never forgot. So then we’d get

into talking about why, and it seemed like he was afraid to get close to me and I wanted to help him get through that.

He kept saying he didn’t know what he wanted in life, and I would try to help him clarify what the issues were for

him.” Thus, Jill fell into the role of “shrink” with Randy, trying to help him be more emotionally present for her.

That he did not want her was something she could not accept. She had already decided that he needed her.

Twice, Jill flew to San Diego to spend the weekend with him; on the second visit, he spent their Sunday together

ignoring her, watching television and drinking beer. It was one of the worst days she could remember.

“Was he a heavy drinker?” I asked Jill. She looked startled.

“Well, no, not really. I don’t know, actually. I never really thought about it. Of course, he was drinking the night I

met him, but that’s only natural. After all, we were in a bar. Sometimes when we talked on the phone I could hear

ice tinkling in a glass and I’d tease him about it—you know, drinking alone and all that. Actually, I was never with

him when he wasn’t drinking, but I just assumed that he liked to drink. That’s normal, isn’t it?”

She paused, thinking. “You know, sometimes on the phone he would talk funny, especially for an attorney. Really

vague and imprecise; forgetful, not consistent. But I never thought of it as happening because he was drinking. I

don’t know how I explained it to myself. I guess I just didn’t let myself think about it.”

She looked at me sadly.

“Maybe he did drink too much, but it must have been because I bored him. I guess I just wasn’t interesting

enough and he didn't really want to be with me." Anxiously, she continued.
"My husband never wanted to be

around me—that was obvious!" Her eyes brimmed over as she struggled on.
"Neither did my father.... What is it in

me? Why do they all feel that way about me? What am I doing wrong?"

The moment Jill became aware of a problem between her and someone
important to her, she was willing not only

to try and solve it but also to take responsibility for having created it. If
Randy, her husband, and her father all failed

to love her, she felt it must be because of something she had done or failed to
do.

Jill's attitudes, feelings, behavior, and life experiences were typical of a
woman for whom being in love means

being in pain. She exhibited many of the characteristics that women who
love too much have in common.

Regardless of the specific details of their stories and struggles, whether they
have endured a long and difficult

relationship with one man or have been involved in a series of unhappy
partnerships with many men, they share a

common profile. Loving too much does not mean loving too many men, or
falling in love too often, or having too

great a depth of genuine love for another. It means, in truth, obsessing about
a man and calling that obsession love,

allowing it to control your emotions and much of your behavior, realizing
that it negatively influences your health

and well-being, and yet finding yourself unable to let go. It means measuring the degree of your love by the depth of

your torment.

As you read this book, you may find yourself identifying with Jill, or with another of the women whose stories

you encounter, and you may wonder if you, too, are a woman who loves too much. Perhaps, though your problems

with men are similar to theirs, you will have difficulty associating yourself with the “labels” that apply to some of

these women’s backgrounds. We all have strong emotional reactions to words like *alcoholism*, *incest*, *violence*, and

addiction, and sometimes we cannot look at our own lives realistically because we are so afraid of having these

labels apply to us or to those we love. Sadly, our inability to use the words when they do apply often precludes our

getting appropriate help. On the other hand, those dreaded labels may not apply in your life. Your childhood may

have involved problems of a subtler nature. Maybe your father, while providing a financially secure home,

nevertheless deeply disliked and distrusted women, and his inability to love you kept you from loving yourself. Or

your mother’s attitude toward you may have been jealous and competitive in private even though she showed you

off and bragged about you in public, so that you ended up needing to do well to gain her approval and yet fearing the

hostility your success generated in her.

We cannot cover in this one book the myriad ways families can be unhealthy—that would require several

volumes of a rather different nature. It is important to understand, however, that what all unhealthy families have in

common is their inability to discuss *root* problems. There may be other problems that are discussed, often ad

nauseum, but these often cover up the underlying secrets that make the family dysfunctional. It is the degree of

secrecy—the inability to talk about the problems—rather than their severity, that defines both how dysfunctional a

family becomes and how severely its members are damaged.

A dysfunctional family is one in which members play rigid roles and in which communication is severely

restricted to statements that fit these roles. Members are not free to express a full range of experiences, wants, needs,

and feelings, but rather must limit themselves to playing that part which accommodates those played by other family

members. Roles operate in all families, but as circumstances change, the members must also change and adapt in

order for the family to continue to remain healthy. Thus, the kind of mothering appropriate for a one-year-old will be

highly inappropriate for a thirteen-year-old, and the mothering role must alter to accommodate reality. In

dysfunctional families, major aspects of reality are denied, and roles remain rigid.

When no one can discuss what affects every family member individually as well as the family as a whole—

indeed, when such discussion is forbidden implicitly (the subject is changed) or explicitly (“We don’t talk about

those things!”)—we learn not to believe in our own perceptions or feelings. Because our family denies our reality,

we begin to deny it, too. And this severely impairs the development of our basic tools for living life and for relating

to people and situations. It is this basic impairment that operates in women who love too much. We become unable

to discern when someone or something is not good for us. The situations and people that others would naturally

avoid as dangerous, uncomfortable, or unwholesome do not repel us, because we have no way of evaluating them

realistically or self-protectively. We do not trust our feelings, or use them to guide us. Instead, we are actually drawn

to the very dangers, intrigues, dramas, and challenges that others with healthier and more balanced backgrounds

would naturally eschew. And through this attraction we are further damaged, because much of what we are attracted

to is a replication of what we lived with growing up. We get hurt all over again.

No one becomes such a woman, a woman who loves too much, by accident. To grow up as a female in this

society and in such a family can generate some predictable patterns. The following characteristics are typical of

women who love too much, women like Jill and perhaps like you, too.

1. Typically, you come from a dysfunctional home in which your emotional needs were not met.

2. Having received little real nurturing yourself, you try to fill this unmet need vicariously by becoming a

caregiver, especially to men who appear in some way needy.

3. Because you were never able to change your parent(s) into the warm, loving caretaker(s) you longed for, you

respond deeply to the familiar type of emotionally unavailable man whom you can again try to change

through your love.

4. Terrified of abandonment, you will do anything to keep a relationship from dissolving.

5. Almost nothing is too much trouble, takes too much time, or is too expensive if it will “help” the man you

are involved with.

6. Accustomed to lack of love in personal relationships, you are willing to wait, hope, and try harder to please.

7. You are willing to take far more than 50 percent of the responsibility, guilt, and blame in any relationship.

8. Your self-esteem is critically low, and deep inside you do not believe you deserve to be happy. Rather, you

believe you must earn the right to enjoy life.

9. You have a desperate need to control your men and your relationships, having experienced little security in

childhood. You mask your efforts to control people and situations as “being helpful.”

10. In a relationship, you are much more in touch with your dream of how it could be than with the reality of your situation.

11. You are addicted to men and to emotional pain.

12. You may be predisposed emotionally and often biochemically to becoming addicted to drugs, alcohol, and/or certain foods, particularly sugary ones.

13. By being drawn to people with problems that need fixing, or by being enmeshed in situations that are

chaotic, uncertain, and emotionally painful, you avoid focusing on your responsibility to yourself.

14. You may have a tendency toward episodes of depression, which you try to forestall through the excitement

provided by an unstable relationship.

15. You are not attracted to men who are kind, stable, reliable, and interested in you. You find such “nice” men

boring.

Jill displayed nearly all of these characteristics, to a greater or lesser degree. It was as much because she

embodied so many of the above attributes as because of anything else she may have told me about him that I

suspected Randy might have a drinking problem. Women with this type of emotional makeup are consistently drawn

to men who are emotionally unavailable for one reason or another. Being addicted is a primary way of being

emotionally unavailable.

Right from the start, Jill was willing to take more responsibility than Randy for initiating the relationship and

keeping it going. Like so many women who love too much, she was obviously a very responsible person, a high

achiever who was succeeding in many areas of her life, but who nevertheless had little self-esteem. The realization

of her academic and career goals could not counterbalance the personal failure she endured in her love relationships.

Every phone call Randy forgot to make dealt a serious blow to her fragile self-image, which she then worked

heroically to shore up by trying to extract signs of caring from him. Her willingness to take full blame for a failed

relationship was typical, as was her inability to assess the situation realistically and take care of herself by pulling

out when the lack of reciprocity became apparent.

Women who love too much have little regard for their personal integrity in a love relationship. They pour their

energies into changing the other person's behavior or feelings toward them through desperate manipulations, such as

Jill's expensive long-distance phone calls and flights to San Diego (remember, her budget was extremely limited).

Her long-distance "therapy sessions" with him were much more an attempt to make him into the man she needed

him to be than to help him discover who he was. Actually, Randy did not want to help in discovering who he was. If

he had been interested in such a journey of self-discovery, he would have done most of the work himself, rather than

sitting by passively while Jill tried to force him to analyze himself. She made these efforts because her only other

alternative was to recognize and accept him for what he was—a man who was careless of her feelings and of the

relationship.

Let's return to Jill's session to better understand what brought her to my office that day.

She was talking about her father now.

"He was such a stubborn man. I swore that someday I'd win an argument with him." She reflected for a moment.

"I never did, though. That's probably why I went into law. I just love the idea of arguing a case and *winning!*" She

flashed a wide smile at the thought and then sobered again.

"Do you know what I did once? I made him tell me that he loved me, and I made him give me a hug." Jill was

trying to relate it as a lighthearted anecdote from her growing-up years, but it didn't play that way. The shadow of a

hurt young girl came through.

"It never would have happened if I hadn't forced him. But he did love me. He just couldn't show me. He never

was able to say it again. So I'm really glad I made him. Otherwise I never would have heard him say it to me. I had

been waiting years and years. I was eighteen when I said to him, 'You're going to tell me that you love me,' and I

wouldn't move until he had said it. Then I asked him for a hug and really I had to hug him first. He just sort of

squeezed back and patted my shoulder a bit, but that's okay. I really needed that from him." The tears were back

now, this time spilling over her round cheeks.

"Why was that so hard for him to do? It seems like such a *basic* thing, to be able to tell your daughter that you

love her."

Again she studied her folded hands.

"I tried so hard. That's even why I argued and fought so hard with him. I thought if I ever won, he'd have to be

proud of me. He'd have to admit I was good. I wanted his approval, which I guess means his love, more than

anything in the world...."

It became clear in talking further with her that Jill's family blamed her father's rejection of her on the fact that he

had wanted a son and had gotten a daughter instead. This facile explanation of his coldness toward his child was far

easier for all of them, including Jill, to accept than was the truth about him. But after considerable time in therapy,

Jill recognized that her father had had close emotional ties with no one, that he had been virtually incapable of

expressing warmth or love or approval to anyone in his personal sphere. There had always been “reasons” for his

emotional withholding, such as quarrels and differences of opinion or irreversible facts such as Jill’s having been a

girl. Every member of the family chose to accept those reasons as legitimate rather than to examine the consistently

distant quality of their relationships with him.

Jill actually found it harder to accept her father’s basic inability to love than to continue in her self-blame. As long

as the fault was hers, there was also hope—that someday she could change herself sufficiently to bring about a

change in him.

It is true for all of us that when an emotionally painful event occurs, and we tell ourselves it is our fault, we are

actually saying that we have control of it: if we change, the pain will stop. This dynamic is behind much of the self-

blame in women who love too much. By blaming ourselves, we hold on to the hope that we will be able to figure out

what we are doing wrong and correct it, thereby controlling the situation and stopping the pain.

This pattern in Jill became clearly illuminated during a session soon thereafter when she described her marriage.

Inexorably drawn to someone with whom she could re-create the emotionally deprived climate of her growing-up

years with her father, her marriage was an opportunity for her to try again to win withheld love.

As Jill recounted how she met her husband, I thought of a maxim I'd heard from a fellow therapist: Hungry

people make poor shoppers. Desperately hungry for love and approval, and familiar with rejection though never

identifying it as such, Jill was destined to find Paul.

She told me, "We met in a bar. I had been washing my clothes in a laundromat and went next door for a few

minutes, to this sleazy little place. Paul was shooting pool and asked me if I wanted to play. I said sure, and that's

how it started. He asked me out. I said no, that I didn't go out with men I met in bars. Well, he followed me back to

the laundromat and just kept talking to me. I finally gave him my phone number and we went out the next night.

"Now, you're not going to believe this, but we ended up living together two weeks later. He had nowhere to live

and I had to move out of my apartment, so we got a place together. And none of it was that great, not the sex or the

companionship or anything. But after a year went by, my mother was getting nervous about what I was doing, so we

got married." Jill was shaking those curls again.

In spite of this casual beginning, she soon became obsessed. Because Jill had grown up trying to make whatever

was wrong right, she naturally carried that pattern of thinking and behaving into her marriage.

“I tried so hard. I mean, I really loved him and I was determined to make him love me back. I was going to be the

perfect wife. I cooked and cleaned like crazy, and I was trying to go to school, too. A lot of the time he didn’t work.

He would lie around or disappear for days at a time. That was hell, the waiting and wondering. But I learned not to

ask where he had been because ...” She hesitated, shifting in the chair. “It’s hard for me to admit this. I was so sure I

could make it all work if I just tried hard enough, but sometimes I’d get angry after he disappeared and then he’d hit

me.

“I’ve never told anyone about this before. I’ve always been so ashamed. I just never saw myself that way, you

know? As someone who would let herself be hit.”

Jill’s marriage ended when her husband found another woman on one of his extended absences from home. In

spite of the agony the marriage had become, Jill was devastated when Paul left.

“I knew that whoever the woman was, she was everything I wasn’t. I could actually see why Paul left me. I felt

like I had nothing to offer him or anyone. I didn’t blame him for leaving me. I mean, after all, I couldn’t stand me

either.”

Much of my work with Jill was to help her understand the disease process in which she had been immersed for so

long, her addiction to doomed relationships with emotionally unavailable men. The addictive aspect of Jill's

behavior in her relationships parallels the addictive use of a drug. Early in each of her relationships there was an

initial "high," a feeling of euphoria and excitement while she believed that finally her deepest needs for love,

attention, and emotional security might be met. Believing this, Jill became more and more dependent on the man and

the relationship in order to feel good. Then, like an addict who must use a drug more as it produces less effect, she

was driven to pursue the relationship harder as it gave her less satisfaction and fulfillment. Trying to sustain what

had once felt so wonderful, so promising, Jill slavishly dogged her man, needing more contact, more reassurance,

more love as she received less and less. The worse the situation became, the harder it was to let go because of the

depth of her need. She could not quit.

Jill was twenty-nine years old when she first came to see me. Her father had been dead seven years, but he was

still the most important man in her life. In a way he was the only man in her life, because in every relationship with

another male to whom she was attracted, she was really relating to her father, still trying so very hard to win love

from this man who could not, because of his own problems, give it.

When our childhood experiences are particularly painful, we are often unconsciously compelled to re-create

similar situations throughout our lives, in a drive to gain mastery over them.

For instance, if we, like Jill, loved and needed a parent who did not respond to us, we often became involved with

a similar person, or a series of them, in adulthood in an attempt to “win” the old struggle to be loved. Jill personified

this dynamic as she found herself drawn to one unsuitable man after another.

There is an old joke about a nearsighted man who has lost his keys late at night and is looking for them by the

light of a street lamp. Another person comes along and offers to help him look but asks him, “Are you sure this is

where you lost them?” He answers, “No, but this is where the light is.”

Jill, like the man in the story, was searching for what was missing in her life, not where there was some hope of

finding it, but where, because she was a woman who loved too much, it was easiest for her to look.

Throughout this book we will explore what loving too much is, why we do it, where we learned it, and how to

change our style of loving into a healthier way of relating. Let’s look again at the characteristics of women who love

too much, one by one this time.

1. Typically, you come from a dysfunctional home in which your emotional needs

were not met.

Perhaps the best way to approach understanding this characteristic is to begin with the second half of it first: “... in

which your emotional needs were not met.” “Emotional needs” does not refer only to your need for love and

affection. Although that aspect is important, even more critical is the fact that your perceptions and feelings were

largely ignored or denied rather than accepted and validated. An example: Parents are fighting. Child feels afraid.

Child asks mother, “Why are you mad at Daddy?” Mother answers, “I’m not mad,” while looking angry and

troubled. Child now feels confused, more afraid, and says, “I heard you shouting.” Mother replies angrily, “I told

you I’m not mad but I’m going to be if you keep this up!” Child now feels fear, confusion, anger, and guilt. Her

parent has implied that her perceptions are incorrect, but if that is true, where are these feelings of fear coming from?

The child must now choose between knowing that she is right and that her parent has deliberately lied to her, or

thinking that she is wrong in what she hears, sees, and feels. She will often settle for confusion, tuning out her

perceptions so that she does not have to experience the discomfort of having them invalidated. This impairs a child’s

ability to trust herself and her perceptions, both in childhood and later in adulthood, especially in close relationships.

Needs for affection may also be denied or insufficiently met. When parents are fighting with each other, or caught

up in other kinds of struggles, there may be little time or attention left for the children in the family. This leaves a

child hungry for love while not knowing how to trust it or accept it and feeling undeserving of it.

Now for the first part of this characteristic: coming from a dysfunctional home. Dysfunctional homes are those in

which one or more of the following occur:

- abuse of alcohol and/or other drugs (prescribed or illicit)
- compulsive behavior such as compulsive eating, working, cleaning, gambling, spending, dieting, exercising,

and so on; these practices are addictive behaviors, as well as progressive disease processes; among their

many other harmful effects, they effectively disrupt and prevent honest contact and intimacy in a family

- battering of spouse and/or children
- inappropriate sexual behavior on the part of a parent toward a child, ranging from seductiveness to incest
- constant arguing and tension
- extended periods of time in which parents refuse to speak to each other
- parents who have conflicting attitudes or values or display contradictory behaviors that compete for their

children's allegiance

- parents who are competitive with each other or with their children
- a parent who cannot relate to others in the family and thus actively avoids them, while blaming them for this

avoidance

- extreme rigidity about money, religion, work, use of time, displays of affection, sex, television, housework,

sports, politics, and so on; obsession with any of these can preclude contact and intimacy, because the

emphasis is not on relating, but on following the rules

If one parent displays any of these kinds of behaviors or obsessions, it is damaging to a child. If both parents are

caught up in any of these unhealthy practices, the results may be even more detrimental. Often parents practice

complementary kinds of pathology. For instance, an alcoholic and a compulsive eater frequently will marry, and

then each will struggle to control the other's addiction. Parents also often balance each other in unhealthy ways;

when the smothering, overprotective mother is married to the angry and rejecting father each parent is actually

enabled by the other's behavior and attitudes to continue relating to the children in a destructive way.

Dysfunctional families come in many styles and varieties, but they all share one effect they have on children

growing up in them: these children are to some extent damaged in their ability to feel and relate.

2. Having received little real nurturing yourself, you try to fill this unmet need

vicariously by becoming a caregiver, especially to men who appear in some way

needy.

Think about how children, especially little girls, behave when they are lacking the love and attention they want and

need. While a little boy may become angry and act out with destructive behavior and fighting, more often a little girl

will turn her attention to a favorite doll. Rocking and soothing it, and at some level identifying with it, that little girl

is engaged in a roundabout effort to receive the nurturing she needs. As adults, women who love too much do the

same thing, perhaps only slightly more subtly. In general, we become caregivers in most, if not all, areas of our

lives. Women from dysfunctional homes (and especially, I have observed, from alcoholic homes) are

overrepresented in the helping professions, working as nurses, counselors, therapists, and social workers. We are

drawn to those who are needy, compassionately identifying with their pain and seeking to relieve it in order to

ameliorate our own. That the men who attract us most strongly are those who appear to be needy makes sense if we

understand that it is our own wish to be loved and helped that is at the root of the attraction.

A man who appeals to us need not necessarily be penniless or in ill health. Perhaps he is unable to relate well to

others, or is cold and unaffectionate, or stubborn or selfish, or sulking or melancholy. Maybe he is a bit wild and

irresponsible, or unable to make a commitment or be faithful. Or maybe he tells us he has never been able to love

anyone. Depending on our own background, we will respond to different varieties of neediness. But respond we

will, with the conviction that this man needs our help, our compassion, and our wisdom in order to improve his life.

3. Because you were never able to change your parent(s) into the warm, loving

caretaker(s) you longed for, you respond deeply to the familiar type of emotionally

unavailable man whom you can again try to change through your love.

Perhaps your struggle was with one parent, perhaps with both. But whatever was wrong or missing or painful in the

past is what you are trying to make turn out right in the present.

Now it begins to be apparent that something very unwholesome and self-defeating is going on. It would be fine if

we brought all our sympathy, compassion, and understanding into relationships with healthy men, men with whom

there was some hope of getting our own needs met. But we are not attracted to healthy men who could give us what

we need. They seem boring to us. We are attracted to men who replicate for us the struggle we endured with our

parents, when we tried to be good enough, loving enough, worthy enough, helpful enough, and smart enough to win

the love, attention, and approval from those who could not give us what we needed, because of their own problems

and preoccupations. Now we operate as though love, attention, and approval don't count unless we are able to

extract them from a man who is also unable to readily give them to us, because of his own problems and

preoccupations.

4. Terrified of abandonment, you will do anything to keep a relationship from dissolving.

Abandonment is a very strong word. It implies being left, possibly to die, because we may not be able to survive

alone. There is literal abandonment, and there is emotional abandonment. Every woman who loves too much has at

least experienced profound emotional abandonment, with all the terror and emptiness that implies. As an adult,

being left by a man who represents in so many ways those people who first abandoned us brings up all the terror

again. Of course, we would do anything to avoid feeling that way again. Which leads into the next characteristic.

5. Almost nothing is too much trouble, takes too much time, or is too expensive if it will “help” the man you are involved with.

The theory behind all this helping is that if it works, the man will become everything you want and need him to be,

which means that you will win that struggle to gain what you’ve wanted so much for so long.

So, while we are often frugal and even self-denying on our own behalf, we will go to any lengths to help him.

Some of our efforts on his behalf include

- buying him clothes to improve his self-image
- finding a therapist for him and begging him to go
- financing expensive hobbies to help him use his time better
- going through disruptive geographic relocations because “he’s not happy here”
- giving him half or all of our property and possessions so he won’t feel inferior to us
- providing him with a place to live so that he can feel secure
- allowing him to abuse us emotionally because “he was never allowed to express his feelings before”
- finding him a job.

This is only a partial list of the ways we try to help. We rarely question the appropriateness of our actions on his

behalf. In fact, we spend a great deal of time and energy trying to think up new approaches that might work better

than those we’ve already tried.

6. Accustomed to lack of love in personal relationships, you are willing to wait, hope, and try harder to please.

If another person with a different kind of history found herself in our circumstances, she would be able to say, “This

feels awful. I’m not going to continue to do this anymore.” But we assume that if it isn’t working and we aren’t

happy then somehow we haven't done enough yet. We see every nuance of behavior as perhaps indicating that our

partner is finally changing. We live on hope that tomorrow will be different. Waiting for him to change is actually

more comfortable than changing ourselves and our own lives.

7. You are willing to take far more than 50 percent of the responsibility, guilt, and

blame in any relationship.

Often those of us from dysfunctional homes had parents who were irresponsible, childish, and weak. We grew up

fast and became pseudo-adults long before we were ready for the burdens that role carried. But we were also pleased

with the power that was conferred upon us by our families and others. Now as adults we believe it is up to us to

make our relationships work, and we often team up with irresponsible, blaming partners who contribute to our sense

that it really is all up to us. We are experts at carrying the burden.

8. Your self-esteem is critically low, and deep inside you do not believe you deserve

to be happy. Rather, you believe you must earn the right to enjoy life.

If our parents cannot find us worthy of their love and attention, how can we believe that we really are fine, good

people? Very few women who love too much have a conviction, at the core of their being, that they deserve to love

and be loved simply because they exist. We believe instead that we harbor terrible faults or flaws and that we must

do good works in order to make up for this. We live in guilt that we have these shortcomings and in fear of being

found out. We work very, very hard at trying to appear to be good, because we don't believe we are.

9. You have a desperate need to control your men and your relationships, having

experienced little security in childhood. You mask your efforts to control people and

situations as “being helpful.”

Living in any of the more chaotic types of dysfunctional families such as an alcoholic, violent, or incestuous one, a

child will inevitably feel panic at the family's loss of control. The people on whom she depends are not there for her

because they are too sick to protect her. In fact, that family is often a source of threat and harm rather than the source

of security and protection she needs. Because this kind of experience is so overwhelming, so devastating, those of us

who have suffered in this way seek to turn the tables, so to speak. By being strong and helpful to others we protect

ourselves from the panic that comes from being at another's mercy. We need to be with people whom we can help,

in order to feel safe and in control.

10. In a relationship, you are much more in touch with your dream of how it could

be than with the reality of your situation.

When we love too much we live in a fantasy world, where the man with whom we are so unhappy or so dissatisfied

is transformed into what we are sure he can become, indeed will become with our help. Because we know very little

about being happy in a relationship and have very little experience with having someone we care for meet our

emotional needs, that dream world is the closest we dare come to having what we want.

If we already had a man who was everything we wanted, what would he need us for? And all that talent (and

compulsion) for helping would have nowhere to operate. A major part of our identity would be out of a job. So we

choose a man who is not what we want—and we dream on.

11. You are addicted to men and to emotional pain.

In the words of Stanton Peele, author of *Love and Addiction*, “An addictive experience is one which absorbs a

person’s consciousness, and as with analgesics, relieves their sense of anxiety and pain. There’s perhaps nothing

quite as good for absorbing our consciousness as a love relationship of a certain type. An addictive relationship is

characterized by a desire for another person’s reassuring presence.... The second criterion is that it detracts from a

person’s ability to pay attention to and deal with other aspects of her life.”

We use our obsession with the men we love to avoid our pain, emptiness, fear, and anger. We use our

relationships as drugs, to avoid experiencing what we would feel if we held still with ourselves. The more painful

our interactions with our man, the greater the distraction he provides us. A truly awful relationship simply serves the

same function for us as a very strong drug. Without a man on whom to focus, we go into withdrawal, often with

many of the same physical and emotional symptoms of that state that accompany actual drug withdrawal: nausea,

sweating, chills, shaking, pacing, obsessive thinking, depression, inability to sleep, panic, and anxiety attacks. In an

effort to relieve these symptoms, we return to our last partner or desperately seek a new one.

12. You may be predisposed biochemically as well as emotionally to abusing drugs,

alcohol, and/or certain foods, usually sugary ones.

The above applies especially to the many women who love too much who are daughters of substance abusers. All

women who love too much carry the emotional backlog of experiences that could lead them to abuse mind-altering

substances in order to escape their feelings. But children of addictive parents also tend to inherit a genetic

predisposition to developing their own addictions.

It may be because refined sugar is nearly identical in molecular structure to ethyl alcohol that so many daughters

of alcoholics develop an addiction to it and become compulsive eaters. Refined sugar is not a food but a drug. It has

no food value, only empty calories. It can dramatically alter brain chemistry and is a highly addicting substance for

many people.

13. By being drawn to people with problems that need fixing, or by being enmeshed

in situations that are chaotic, uncertain, and emotionally painful, you keep from

focusing on your responsibility to yourself.

While we are very good at intuiting what someone else feels or figuring out what someone else needs or should do,

we are not in touch with our own feelings and are unable to make wise decisions about important aspects of our lives

that trouble us. We often do not really know who we are, and being embroiled in dramatic problems keeps us from

having to hold still and find out.

None of this is to say that we may not emote. We may cry and scream and weep and wail. But we are not able to

use our emotions to guide us in making the necessary and important choices in our life.

14. You may have a tendency toward episodes of depression, which you try to

forestall through the excitement provided by an unstable relationship.

An example: One of my clients, who had a history of depression and was married to an alcoholic, likened living

with him to having a car accident every day. The terrific ups and downs, the surprises, the maneuvers, the

unpredictability and instability of the relationship cumulatively presented a constant and daily shock to her system.

If you've ever had a car accident in which you weren't seriously injured, you may have experienced a definite "up"

feeling the day or so following the event. This is because your body had undergone an extreme shock, and

adrenaline was suddenly available in unusually high amounts. This adrenaline accounts for the high. If you are

someone who struggles with depression, you will unconsciously seek situations that keep you stirred up, much like

the car accident (or the marriage to an alcoholic), so that you stay too high to feel low.

Depression, alcoholism, and eating disorders are closely related and seem to be genetically linked. Most anorexics

with whom I have worked, for instance, had two alcoholic parents, and many of my women clients with problems of

depression had at least one alcoholic parent. If you are someone who came from an alcoholic family, you are likely

on two counts to have problems with depression, because of your past and because of your genetic inheritances.

Ironically, the excitement of a relationship with someone with that disease may strongly appeal to you.

15. You are not attracted to men who are kind, stable, reliable, and interested in

you. You find such “nice” men boring.

We find the unstable man exciting, the unreliable man challenging, the unpredictable man romantic, the immature

man charming, the moody man mysterious. The angry man needs our understanding. The unhappy man needs our

comforting. The inadequate man needs our encouragement, and the cold man needs our warmth. But we cannot

“fix” a man who is fine just as he is, and if he is kind and cares for us then we can’t suffer, either. Unfortunately, if

we can’t love a man too much, we usually can’t love him at all.

In the chapters that follow, each of the women you will meet has, like Jill, a story to tell about loving too much.

Through their stories perhaps you will be helped to understand the patterns of your own life more clearly. Then you

will also be able to employ the tools given toward the end of the book to change those patterns into a new

configuration of self-fulfillment, love, and joy. This is my wish for you.

2

Good Sex in Bad Relationships

Oh my man I love him so-he’ll never know

All my life is just despair— but I don’t care

When he takes me in his arms the world is bright ...

—“*My Man*”

The young woman who sat in front of me was wrapped in despair. Her pretty face still displayed yellow and green

traces of the terrible bruises she had received a month ago when she had deliberately driven her car off a cliff.

“It was in the newspaper,” she told me slowly, painfully, “all about the accident, with pictures of the car dangling

there ... but he never even got in touch with me.” Her voice raised a little, and just a hint of healthy anger flickered

before she slid back into her desolation.

Trudi, who had very nearly died for love, then brought up what was for her the central question, the one that made

the abandonment by her lover inexplicable and nearly unendurable: “How could the sex between us be so good,

make us both feel so wonderful, and bring us so close together when we really had nothing else going for us? Why

did that work when nothing else did?” As she began to cry, she gave every appearance of a very young, very hurt

child. “I thought I was making him love me, by giving myself to him. I gave him everything, everything I had to

give.” She leaned over, holding her stomach and rocking. “Oh, but it hurts to know that I could do all that for

nothing.”

Trudi remained doubled up, sobbing for a long time, lost in the empty place where her myth of love had lived.

When she was able to talk again, she continued in the same muted wail. “All I ever cared about was making Jim

happy and keeping him with me. I didn’t ask for anything except that he spend time with me.”

After Trudi had cried again for a while, I remembered what she had told me about her family and asked her softly,

“Wasn’t that what your mother wanted from your father, too? Basically just that he spend time with her?”

Suddenly she sat upright. “Oh, my God! You’re right. I even sound just like my mother. The person I most

wanted *not* to be like, the one who ran around making suicide attempts to get her way. Oh, my God!” she repeated

and then looked at me, face wet with tears, and said quietly, “That’s really awful.”

She paused and I spoke. “Lots of times we find ourselves doing the things our same-sex parent did, the very

actions we promised ourselves we would never, never do. It’s because we learned from their actions, even their

feelings, what it is to be a man or a woman.”

“But I didn’t try to kill myself to get back at Jim,” Trudi protested. “I just couldn’t stand how awful I felt, how

worthless and unwanted.” Another pause. “Maybe that’s the way my mother felt, too. I guess that’s the way you end

up feeling when you try to keep someone around who has other, more important things to do.”

Trudi had tried, all right, and the enticement she had used was sex.

In a later session, when the pain wasn't quite so fresh, the subject of sex came up again. "I've always been very

sexually responsive," she reported with a mixture of pride and guilt, "so much so that in high school I was afraid I

was a nymphomaniac.

"All I could think about was the next time my boyfriend and I could be together to make love. I was always trying

to arrange everything so that we could have someplace to go and be alone together. They say that guys are supposed

to be the ones who always want sex. I know I wanted it more than he did. At least, I went to a lot more trouble to

make it happen than he did."

Trudi was sixteen when she and her high school steady first "went all the way," as she put it. He was a football

player who took the fact that he was in training very seriously. He seemed to believe that too much sex with Trudi

was going to diminish his prowess on the playing field. While he made excuses about not staying out too late before

a game, she countered by arranging for afternoon babysitting sessions during which she could seduce him on the

front-room couch while the infant slept in the nearby nursery. Eventually, though, Trudi's most creative efforts to

transmute his passion for sports into a passion for her failed, and this young man, courtesy of a football scholarship,

left for a distant college.

After a spell of crying nightly and berating herself for not having been able to persuade him to choose her over his

athletic ambitions, Trudi was ready to try again.

It was the summer between high school and college and she was still living at home, a home that was coming

apart at the seams. After years of threatening to do so, Trudi's mother had finally initiated divorce proceedings,

hiring an attorney known for his willingness to fight dirty. Her parents' marriage had been of the stormiest order,

pitting her father's compulsive workaholism against her mother's fervent, sometimes violent, and occasionally self-

destructive efforts at coercing him to spend more time with her and their two children, Trudi and her older sister,

Beth. He was so rarely home, and for such brief periods, that his wife caustically referred to these sojourns as "pit

stops."

"They were the pits, all right," Trudi remembered. "His visits always degenerated into horrible, protracted fights,

with Mother screaming and accusing him of not loving any of us, and Father insisting that he worked as hard and as

long as he did for our sakes. The times he did spend at home always seemed to end with the two of them screaming

at each other. He'd usually leave, slamming the door and yelling, "No wonder I never want to come home!" but

sometimes, if Mother had sobbed enough, or had threatened him again with divorce, or maybe taken a lot of pills

and gone to the hospital, he would change for a while, come home early, and spend time with us. Mother would start

making these wonderful meals, to reward him, I guess, for coming home to his family.” She frowned. “After about

three or four nights, he’d be late again, and there’d be a phone call. ‘Oh, I see. Oh, *really?*’ Mother would say, all

icy. Pretty soon, she’d start screaming obscenities at him, and then bang the phone down. Now here we were, Beth

and I, all dressed up because Daddy was supposed to come home for dinner. We probably had set the table

especially nicely, the way Mother always told us to when he was supposed to come home, with candles and flowers.

And here Mother would be, storming around the kitchen, screaming and banging pots and calling Daddy horrible

names. Then she’d calm down, go all icy again, and come out to tell us that we would just eat alone, without him.

That was even worse than the screaming. She’d serve us and sit down, never looking at us. We’d get so nervous,

Beth and I, with all the quiet. We wouldn’t dare speak, and we wouldn’t dare not eat. We’d stay there at the table,

trying to make it better for Mother, but there was really nothing we could do for her. After those meals I usually got

sick in the middle of the night with terrible nausea and vomiting.” Trudi shook her head stoically. “Definitely not

conducive to healthy digestion.”

“Or to learning healthy patterns of relating,” I added, for it was in this climate that Trudi learned what little she

knew about dealing with someone she loved.

“What was it like for you when that was going on?” I asked her.

Trudi thought for a while and then nodded as she responded, emphasizing the correctness of her answer. “In the

middle of it I was scared, but mostly I felt lonely. No one was looking my way or wondering what I was feeling or

doing. My sister was so shy we never talked much. She hid out in her room when she wasn’t taking music lessons.

She played her flute mostly, I think, to shut out the arguments and to give herself an excuse to stay out of

everybody’s way. I learned not to make trouble either. I kept quiet, pretended I didn’t notice what my parents were

doing to each other, and in fact kept everything I was thinking to myself. I tried to do well in school. Sometimes it

felt like that was the only time my father ever noticed me. ‘Let me see your report card,’ he’d say, and we’d talk

about it together for a little while. He admired any kind of achievement, so I tried to do well for him.”

Trudi rubbed her brow and continued thoughtfully. “There’s another feeling, too. Sad. I think I felt sad all the

time, but I never told anyone. If someone had asked, ‘What do you feel inside?’ I would have said I was fine,

absolutely fine. Even if I could have said I was sad, I could never have explained why. How could I justify feeling

that way? I wasn't suffering. Nothing important was missing from my life. I mean, we never missed a meal, never

went without anything we needed." Trudi was still unable to fully acknowledge the depth of her emotional isolation

in that family. She had suffered from a dearth of nurturing and attention because of a father who was virtually

inaccessible and a mother who was consumed by her anger and frustration with him. This had left Trudi and her

sister starved emotionally.

Ideally, as she grew up Trudi would have been able to practice sharing who she was with her parents in return for

their love and attention, but her parents were unable to be on the receiving end of this gift of herself; they were too

caught up in their battle of wills. So, as she grew older she took herself and her gift of love (in the guise of sex)

elsewhere. But she offered herself to equally unwilling or unavailable recipients. What else, after all, did she know

how to do? Nothing else would have felt "right" or would have fit with the lack of love and attention to which she

was already accustomed.

Meanwhile, the conflict between her parents heated up in the new arena of the divorce court. In the midst of the

fireworks Trudi's sister ran off with her music teacher. Her parents scarcely paused in their battle long enough to

register the fact that their elder daughter had left the state with a man twice her age who was barely able to support

himself. Trudi, too, was looking for love, dating men frenetically and going to bed with nearly every one of them. In

her heart she believed that the problems at home were her mother's fault, that her mother had driven her father away

with nagging and threats. Trudi vowed she would never, ever be the kind of angry, demanding woman she saw her

mother to be. She would, instead, win her man with love, understanding, and the total gift of herself. She'd tried

once already, with the football player, to be so devotedly loving and giving as to be irresistible, but her approach

hadn't worked. She concluded not that her approach was mistaken, or that the object of her approach was a poor

choice, but that she hadn't given enough. So she kept trying, kept giving, yet none of the young men she dated

stayed around.

The fall semester began and Trudi soon met a married man, Jim, in one of her classes at the local city college. He

was a policeman studying law enforcement theory there, to make himself eligible for promotion. He was thirty, had

two children and a pregnant wife. Over coffee one afternoon he told Trudi how young he'd been when he married,

and how little happiness he felt in his relationship with his wife. He warned her, in a fatherly fashion, not to get

caught in the same domestic trap by getting married early and being tied down to responsibilities. Trudi felt flattered

that he would confide in her about something so private as his disenchantment with married life. He seemed kind,

and vulnerable somehow, a little lonely and misunderstood. Jim told her how much talking to her had meant to him

—indeed, how he’d never talked to anyone quite like her before—and asked if she’d meet him again. Trudi quickly

agreed, for although theirs had been a fairly one-sided conversation that day, with Jim doing most of the talking, it

was still more communication than Trudi had ever experienced within her family. Their chat provided her with a

taste of the attention she craved. Two days later, they talked again, this time walking in the hills above the campus,

and he kissed her at the end of their stroll. Within a week, they were trysting at the apartment of an on-duty

policeman three afternoons of the five that Trudi spent at school, and her life began to revolve around their stolen

time together. Trudi refused to look at how her involvement with Jim was affecting her. She skipped classes and

began, for the first time, to fail scholastically. She lied to friends about her activities and then avoided them

completely so that she didn’t have to keep on lying. She curtailed nearly every social activity, caring only about

being with Jim when she could, thinking about him when she couldn’t. She wanted to be available to him in case

there was an extra hour here or there that they could spend together.

In return, Jim gave her a great deal of attention and flattery when they were together. He managed to say exactly

what she needed to hear—about how wonderful, how special, how lovable she was, how she made him happier than

he'd ever been before. His words stirred her to try even harder to thrill and delight him. First she bought beautiful

lingerie to wear just for him, then perfume and oils, which he cautioned her against using because his wife might

notice their scent and wonder what was going on. Undaunted, she read books on lovemaking and tried everything

she learned on him. His rapture spurred her on. There was no greater aphrodisiac for her than being able to arouse

this man. She responded powerfully to his attraction to her. It wasn't her sexuality she was expressing as much as

her feelings of being validated by his sexual responsiveness to her. Because she was actually much more in touch

with his sexuality than with her own, the more responsive he was, the more gratified she felt. She interpreted the

time he stole from his other life to be with her as the validation of her worth for which she hungered. When she

wasn't with him she thought about new ways to enchant him. Her friends finally quit asking her to join them, and

her life narrowed to a single-pointed obsession: making Jim happier than he'd ever been. She felt a thrill of victory

in their every encounter, victory over his disenchantment with life, his inability to experience love and sexual

fulfillment. That she could make him happy made her happy. Finally, her love was working its magic in someone's

life. It was what she'd always wanted. She wasn't like her mother, driving someone away with her demands.

Instead, she was creating a bond built entirely of love and selflessness. She prided herself on how little she asked of

Jim.

"I was very lonely when I wasn't with him, which was a lot of the time. I saw him for only two hours three days a

week, and he never contacted me in between. He took classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and we'd meet

afterward. The time we had together was mostly spent making love. When we were finally alone we would just rush

at each other. It was so intense, so exciting, that sometimes it was hard for either of us to believe that sex could be

that thrilling for any other people in the world. And then, of course, afterward we always had to say goodbye. All the

other hours in the week when I wasn't with him were empty. I spent most of the time we were apart getting ready to

see him again. I'd wash my hair with a special shampoo, do my nails, and just drift along, thinking about him. I

wouldn't let myself think too much about his wife and family. I believed that he'd been trapped into a marriage

before he was old enough to really know what he wanted, and the fact that he had no intention of leaving, no

intention of running away from his obligations, endeared him to me all the more.”

“—and made me all the more comfortable with him,” Trudi might well have added. She was not capable of a

sustained intimate relationship, so the buffer that Jim’s marriage and family provided was actually welcome, just as

the football player’s reluctance to be with her had been. We are only comfortable relating in ways that are already

familiar, and Jim provided both the distance and the lack of commitment that Trudi already knew so well from her

parents’ relationship to her.

The second semester of school was nearly over, summer was coming, and Trudi asked Jim what would happen to

them when school was out and they no longer had that convenient excuse for meeting. He began to frown and

answered vaguely, “I’m not sure. I’ll figure something out.” The frown was enough to stop her. All that tied the two

of them together was the happiness she was able to give him. If he wasn’t happy, it might all come to an end. She

mustn’t make him frown.

School ended and Jim hadn’t figured it out. “I’ll call you,” he said. She waited. A friend’s father offered her a job

in his resort hotel for the summer. Several of her friends also had jobs there and urged her to join them. It would be

fun, they promised her, working at the lake all summer. She turned down the offer, afraid she’d miss Jim’s call.

Though she rarely left the house for three weeks, the call never came.

One hot afternoon in mid-July Trudi was downtown, listlessly shopping. She came out of an air-conditioned store,

blinking in the bright sunlight, and there was Jim—tanned, smiling, and holding hands with a woman who could

only be his wife. With them were two young children, a boy and a girl, and on Jim's chest, in a blue sling, an infant.

Trudi's eyes sought Jim's. He stared back briefly, then looked away, walking past her with his family, his wife, his

life.

Somehow she made, it to her car, even though the pain in her chest nearly prevented her from breathing. She sat

there, in the hot parking lot, sobbing and gasping for air until long after the sun went down. Then slowly, dimly, she

drove to the college, and up into the hills behind it, the hills where she and Jim had first strolled, first kissed. She

drove until the road dropped steeply on one side, and then went straight where she should have turned.

That she survived the crash more or less intact was miraculous. It was also a great disappointment to her. Lying in

the hospital bed, she vowed to try again, as soon as they let her out. She got through the transfer to the psych ward,

the numbing drugs, the obligatory interview with the psychiatrist. Her parents came to see her in. separate shifts,

worked out elaborately through the nursing station. Her father's appearances produced stern lectures about how

much she had to live for, during which Trudi silently counted the number of times he glanced at his watch. He

usually ended with a helpless “Now you know your mother and I each love you, honey. Promise me you won’t do

this again.” Trudi promised dutifully, forcing a small smile, cold with the loneliness of lying to her father about

something so important. His visits were followed by her mother’s, who paced around the room, demanding

insistently, “How could you do this to yourself? How could you do this to us? Why didn’t you tell me something

was wrong? What on earth is the matter, anyway? Are you upset about your father and me?” Then her mother would

settle down into one of the chairs provided for visitors and offer a detailed description of how the divorce was

proceeding, which was supposed to be reassuring. Trudi was usually sick to her stomach during the night after these

visits.

On her last night in the hospital a nurse sat quietly with her and asked her some gently probing questions. The

whole story came pouring out. The nurse finally said to her, “I know you’re thinking of trying it again. Why

shouldn’t you? Nothing’s different tonight than it was a week ago. But before you do, I want you to see someone.”

The nurse, a former client of mine, referred her to me.

So Trudi and I began our work together, the work of healing her need to give more love than she received, to give

and give from an already empty place inside her. There were a few more men in her life over the next two years who

enabled her to examine how she used sex in her relationships. One was a professor at the university where she was

now enrolled. He was a workaholic of her father's caliber, and at first Trudi threw herself into an intense effort to

coax him away from his work and into her loving arms. This time, though, she felt keenly the frustration of her

struggle to change him, and gave it up after five months. At first the challenge had been stimulating, and each time

she "won" his attention for the evening she had felt validated, but Trudi felt herself becoming more and more

dependent on him emotionally while he, in return, gave less and less. During one session she reported, "Last night I

was with David and I was crying, telling him how important he was to me. He started to give me his usual answer

about how I'd just have to understand that he had these important commitments to his work—well, I just stopped

listening. I'd heard it all before anyway. It suddenly became very clear to me that I'd played this scene before, with

my football-playing boyfriend. I was throwing myself at David the same way I had with him."

She smiled ruefully. "You have no idea, the lengths to which I've gone in order to win men's attention. I've run

around throwing off my clothes and blowing in their ears and trying every seductive trick I know. I'm still trying to

get attention from someone who isn't very interested in me. I think the biggest thrill I feel with David when we do

make love is that I've been able to arouse him enough to distract him from what he'd rather be doing. I hate

admitting this, but that has been a big turn-on for me, just being able to get David or Jim or anyone to pay *attention*

to me. I guess because basically I have felt so bad about each relationship, the sex has brought a lot of relief. It

seems for a few moments to dissolve all the barriers and bring us together. And I've wanted that togetherness so

much. But I'm really not willing to keep throwing myself at David. It feels too degrading."

Still, David was not the last of Trudi's impossible men by any means. Her next beau was a young stockbroker

who was a dedicated triathlon competitor. She competed as hard as he did, but for his attention, trying to lure him

away from his rigorous training schedule with the constant promise of her willing body. Much of the time when they

did make love, he was either too tired or too uninterested to achieve or maintain an erection.

One day, in my office, she was describing their most recent failed attempt at lovemaking and suddenly she began

to laugh. "When I think about it, it's too much! No one has ever worked harder than I have to make love to someone

who would rather not." More laughter. Then finally, firmly: "I've got to stop doing this. I'm going to quit looking. I

seem to always be attracted to the men who have nothing to offer me, and don't even want what I have to offer

them.”

This was an important turning point for Trudi. She had become more able to love herself through the process of

therapy, and now she could evaluate a relationship as unrewarding, instead of concluding that she was unlovable and

should try harder. The strong drive to use her sexuality to establish a relationship with a reluctant or impossible

partner diminished sharply, and by the time she left therapy after two years, she was casually dating several young

men and sleeping with none of them.

“It's so different to be on a date with someone and to actually be paying attention to whether I like him, whether

I'm having a good time, whether I think he's a nice person. I never thought about these things before. I was always

trying so hard to make whoever I was with like me, to make sure he had a good time with me and thought I was

nice. You know, after a date I never thought about whether I wanted to see the person again. I was too busy

wondering if he liked me enough to call me for another date. I had it all backward!”

When Trudi decided to leave therapy, she no longer had it backward. She could spot an impossible relationship

easily, and even if a spark of attraction between her and a reluctant suitor flared, it died quickly in her cool

assessment of the man, the situation, and the possibilities. She was no longer in the market for pain and rejection.

She wanted someone who could really be a partner to her, or no one at all. Nothing in between would do. But the

fact remained that Trudi knew nothing about living with the opposites of pain and rejection: comfort and

commitment. She had never known the degree of intimacy that comes from being in the kind of relationship she now

required. Though she had yearned for closeness with a partner, she had never had to function in a climate of true

closeness. That she had been drawn to rejecting men was no accident; Trudi's tolerance for being truly intimate was

low. There had been no intimacy in her family as she grew up, only battles and treaties, each treaty more or less

marking the beginning of the next battle. There had been pain and tension and occasionally some relief from pain

and tension, but never real sharing, real closeness, or real love. In reaction to her mother's manipulations, Trudi's

formula for loving had been to give of herself without asking anything in return. When therapy helped her out of the

trap of her self-sacrificing martyrdom, she was left knowing clearly what not to do, which was a great improvement.

But she was only halfway home.

Trudi's next task was to learn to simply be in the company of men whom she considered nice, even if she also

found them a little boring. Boredom is the sensation that women who love too much so often experience when they

find themselves with a “nice” man: no bells peal, no rockets explode, no stars fall from heaven. In the absence of

excitement they feel antsy, irritable, and awkward, a generally uncomfortable state that is covered over with the

label *boredom*. Trudi didn’t know how to behave in the presence of a man who was kind, considerate, and really

interested in her; like all women who love too much, her skills at relating were honed for a challenge, not for simply

enjoying a man’s company. If she didn’t have to maneuver and manipulate in order to keep a relationship going, she

found it difficult to relate to the man, to feel comfortable and at ease. Because she was used to excitement and pain,

struggle and victory or defeat, an interchange that lacked these powerful components felt too tame to be important,

and unsettling as well. Ironically there would be more discomfort in the presence of steady, dependable, cheerful,

stable fellows than there ever had been with men who were unresponsive, emotionally distant, unavailable, or

uninterested.

A woman who loves too much is *used* to negative traits and behaviors, and she will be more comfortable with

them than with their opposites unless and until she works very hard to change that fact for herself. Unless Trudi

could learn to relate comfortably to a man who considered her best interests as important as his own, she had no

hope of ever achieving a rewarding relationship.

Before recovery, a woman who loves too much usually exhibits the following characteristics regarding how she

feels and how she relates to men sexually:

- She asks the question “How much does he love (or need) me?” and not “How much do I care for him?”
- Most of her sexual interactions with him are motivated by “How can I get him to love (or need) me more?”
- Her drive to give herself sexually to others whom she perceives as needy may result in behavior that she

herself labels promiscuous, but her behavior is primarily for another’s gratification, rather than for her own.

- Sex is one of the tools she uses for manipulating or changing her partner.
- She often finds the power struggles of mutual manipulation very exciting. She behaves seductively to get her

own way and feels great when it works and bad when it doesn’t. Failing to get what she wants usually causes

her to try even harder.

- She confuses anxiety, fear, and pain with love and sexual excitement. She calls the sensation of having a knot

in her stomach “love.”

- She takes her excitement from his excitement. She doesn’t know how to feel good for herself; in fact, she is

threatened by her own feelings.

- Unless the challenge of an unfulfilling relationship is there, she becomes restless. She is not sexually attracted

to a man with whom she is not struggling. Instead, she labels him “boring.”

- She often teams up with a man who is less experienced sexually, in order that she feel in control.

- She yearns for physical closeness, but because she fears being enveloped by another and/or being

overwhelmed by her own needs for nurturing, she is only comfortable with the emotional distance created

and maintained by stress in the relationship. She becomes fearful when a man is willing to be there for her

emotionally as well as sexually. She either runs away or drives him away.

Trudi’s poignant question at the beginning of our work together—“How could the sex between us be so good,

make us both feel so wonderful, and bring us so close together when we really had nothing else going for us?”—is

one that merits examining, because women who love too much often face the dilemma of good sex in an unhappy or

hopeless relationship. Many of us have been taught that “good” sex means “real” love and that, conversely, sex

couldn’t be really satisfying and fulfilling if the relationship as a whole were not right for us. Nothing could be

further from the truth for women who love too much. Because of the dynamics operating at every level of our

interactions with men, including the sexual level, a bad relationship may actually contribute to sex being exciting,

passionate, and compelling.

We may be hard-pressed to explain to family and friends how someone who is not particularly admirable or even

very likable can nevertheless arouse in us a thrill of anticipation and an intensity of longing never matched by what

we feel for someone nicer or more presentable. It is difficult to articulate that we are enchanted by the dream of

calling forth all the positive attributes—the love, caring, attention, integrity, and nobility—we are sure are lying

dormant in our lover, waiting to blossom in the warmth of our love. Women who love too much often tell

themselves that the man with whom they are involved has never really been loved before, not by his parents nor by

his previous wives or girlfriends. We see him as damaged, and readily take on the task of making up for all that was

missing in his life long before we ever met him. In a way, the scenario is a sexually role-reversed version of the tale

of Snow White, who slept under a spell, waiting for the liberation that comes with her true love's first kiss. We want

to be the one to break the spell, to free this man from what we see as his imprisonment. We take his emotional

unavailability, his anger or depression or cruelty or indifference or violence or dishonesty or addiction, for signs that

he has not been loved enough. We pit our love against his faults, his failings, even his pathology. We are determined

to save him through the power of our love.

Sex is one of the primary ways we try to love him toward health. Every sexual encounter carries all our striving to

change him. With every kiss and every touch we work at communicating to him how special and worthy he is, how

much he is admired and cherished. We feel sure that once he is convinced of our love he will be metamorphosed

into his true self, awakened to the embodiment of everything we want and need him to be.

In a way, sex under such circumstances is good because we need it to be; we put a great deal of energy into

making it work, making it wonderful. Whatever response we elicit encourages us to try harder, to be more loving, to

be more convincing. And there are other factors operating as well. For instance, though it would seem that fulfilling

sex would not be very likely in an unhappy relationship, it is important to remember that a sexual climax is a

discharge of both physical and emotional tension. While one woman may avoid sexual involvement with her partner

when there is conflict and strain between them, another woman in similar circumstances may find sex to be a highly

effective way of releasing much of that tension, at least temporarily. For a woman in an unhappy relationship or with

a partner to whom she is ill-matched, the sex act may be the one aspect of the relationship that is gratifying, and the

one way of relating to him that works.

In fact, the degree of sexual release she experiences may be directly related to the degree of discomfort she feels

with her partner. This is easy to understand. Many couples, whether their relationship is healthy or otherwise,

experience particularly good sex after a fight. Following a conflict, two elements contribute to especially intense and

rapturous lovemaking: one is the aforementioned release of tension; the other involves a tremendous investment,

after a fight, in making sex “work,” in order to cement the couple’s bond that has been threatened by their quarrel.

The fact that the couple enjoys a particularly pleasurable and satisfying sexual experience under these circumstances

can seem to validate the relationship as a whole. “Look at how close we are, how loving we can be with each other,

how good we can make each other feel. We really do belong together,” may be the sentiment generated.

The sex act, when it is highly gratifying physically, has the power to create deeply felt bonds between two people.

For women who love too much, especially, the intensity of our struggle with a man may contribute to the intensity

of our sexual experience with him and thus our bond to him. And the converse is also true. When we are involved

with a man who is not so much of a challenge, the sexual dimension may also lack fire and passion. Because we are

not in an almost constant state of excitement over him, and because sex isn't used to prove something, we may find

an easier, more relaxed relationship to be somewhat tame. Compared to the tempestuous styles of relating that we've

known, this tamer kind of experience only seems to verify for us that tension, struggle, heartache, and drama truly

do equal "real love."

Which brings us to a discussion of what real love is. Though love seems to be very difficult to define, I submit

that this is because we try in this culture to combine two very opposite and even apparently mutually exclusive

aspects of love in one definition. Thus, the more we say about love, the more we contradict ourselves, and when we

find one aspect of love battling another, we give up in confusion and frustration and decide that love is too personal,

too mysterious, and too enigmatic to pin down precisely.

The Greeks were smarter. They used different words, eros and *agape*, to distinguish between these two

profoundly different ways of experiencing what we call "love." Eros, of course, refers to passionate love, while

agape describes the stable and committed relationship, *free of passion*, that exists between two individuals who care

deeply for each other.

The contrast of eros and agape allows us to understand our dilemma when we look for both these kinds of love at

one time, in one relationship with one person. It also helps us see why eros and agape each have their champions,

those who claim that one or the other is the only real way of experiencing love, for indeed each has its very special

beauty, truth, and worth. And each type of love also lacks something precious, which only the other has to offer.

Let's look at how proponents of each would describe being in love.

Eros: Real love is an all-consuming, desperate yearning for the beloved, who is perceived as different, mysterious,

and elusive. The depth of love is measured by the intensity of obsession with the loved one. There is little time or

attention for other interests or pursuits, because so much energy is focused on recalling past encounters or imagining

future ones. Often, great obstacles must be overcome, and thus there is an element of suffering in true love. Another

indication of the depth of love is the willingness to endure pain and hardship for the sake of the relationship.

Associated with real love are feelings of excitement, rapture, drama, anxiety, tension, mystery, and yearning.

Agape: Real love is a partnership to which two caring people are deeply committed. These people share many

basic values, interests, and goals, and tolerate good-naturedly their individual differences. The depth of love is

measured by the mutual trust and respect they feel toward each other. Their relationship allows each to be more fully

expressive, creative, and productive in the world. There is much joy in shared experiences both past and present, as

well as those that are anticipated. Each views the other as his/her dearest and most cherished friend. Another

measure of the depth of love is the willingness to look honestly at oneself in order to promote the growth of the

relationship and the deepening of intimacy. Associated with real love are feelings of serenity, security, devotion,

understanding, companionship, mutual support, and comfort.

Passionate love, eros, is what the woman who loves too much usually feels for the man who is impossible. Indeed,

it is because he is impossible that there is so much passion. In order for passion to exist, there needs to be a

continuing struggle, obstacles to overcome, a yearning for more than is available. Passion literally means *suffering*,

and it is often the case that the greater the suffering, the deeper the passion. The thrilling intensity of a passionate

love affair cannot be matched by the gentler comforts of a stable, committed relationship, so were she to finally

receive from the object of her passion what she has so ardently desired, the suffering would stop and the passion

would soon burn itself out. Then, perhaps, she would tell herself she had fallen out of love, because the bittersweet

pain would be gone.

The society in which we live and the ever-present media that surround and saturate our consciousness confuse the

two kinds of love constantly. We are promised in thousands of ways that a passionate relationship (eros) will bring

us contentment and fulfillment (agape). In fact, the implication is that with great enough passion, a lasting bond will

be forged. All the failed relationships based initially on tremendous passion can testify that this premise is false.

Frustration, suffering, and yearning do *not* contribute to a stable, sustained, nurturing relationship, though they

certainly are factors that contribute mightily to a passionate one.

Common interests, common values and goals, and a capacity for deep, sustained intimacy are required if a

couple's initial erotic enchantment with each other is to eventually metamorphose into a committed, caring devotion

that will endure over time. However, what often happens is this: In a passionate relationship, fraught as it must be

with the excitement, suffering, and frustration of new love, there is the feeling that something very important is

missing. What is wanted is commitment, a means of stabilizing this chaotic emotional experience and providing a

feeling of safety and security. Should the obstacles to their being together be overcome and a genuine commitment

forged, these two partners may eventually look at each other and wonder where the passion has gone. They feel safe

and warm and kindly toward each other, but a little cheated, too, because they are no longer fired with desire for

each other.

The price we pay for passion is fear, and the very pain and fear that feed passionate love may also destroy it. The

price we pay for stable commitment is boredom, and the very safety and security that cement such a relationship can

also make it rigid and lifeless.

If there is to be continued excitement and challenge in the relationship after commitment, it must be based not on

frustration or longing but on an ever-deeper exploration of what D. H. Lawrence calls “the joyful mysteries”

between a man and a woman who are committed to each other. As Lawrence implies, this is perhaps best done with

one partner, for the trust and the honesty of agape must combine with the courage and vulnerability of passion in

order to create true intimacy. I once heard a recovering alcoholic put it so simply and so beautifully. He said, “When

I was drinking I went to bed with lots of women, and basically I had the same experience many times. Since I’ve

been sober I’ve only been to bed with my wife, but each time we’re together it’s a new experience.”

The thrill and excitement that comes not from arousing and being aroused but from knowing and being known is

all too rare. Most of us in committed, stable relationships settle for predictability, comfort, and companionship

because we fear exploring the mysteries that we embody together as man and woman, the exposure of our deepest

selves. Yet in our fear of the unknown within us and between us we ignore and avoid the very gift that our

commitment sets within our reach—true intimacy.

For women who love too much, developing true intimacy with a partner can come only after recovery. Later in

the book we'll meet Trudi again as she faces this challenge of recovery that awaits us all.

3

If I Suffer for You, Will You Love Me?

Baby, baby, please don't go.

I think I'm getting high on feeling low.

—“*The Last Blues Song*”

It was necessary for me to lean across several stacked canvasses in order to read the framed verse that hung in the

middle of the cluttered apartment's living room wall. Time-worn and faded, the old-fashioned landscape with its

printed poem read:

My Dear Mother

Mother, dear mother

When I think of you

I want to be all that is fine,

That is true.

All that is worthy

Noble or grand

Has come from you, Mother,

From your guiding hand.

Lisa, an artist of very modest income whose living quarters doubled as her art studio, waved at the poem and

laughed lightly.

“It’s too much, isn’t it? So corny!” But her next words betrayed a deeper sentiment.

“I saved it when a friend of mine was moving and going to throw it out. She’d gotten it from a thrift store as a

joke. I think there’s some truth to it, though, don’t you?” Then she laughed again and said ruefully, “Loving my

mother has gotten me into a lot of trouble with men.”

At this, Lisa paused and reflected. Tall, with wide-set green eyes and long, straight dark hair, she was a beauty.

She motioned me to sit on a quilt-covered mattress in a relatively uncrowded corner of the floor and offered me tea.

As it brewed, she remained silent for a few moments.

Lisa had come to my attention through a mutual friend who had told me some of her history. Because she had

grown up with alcoholism in her family, Lisa was a co-alcoholic. The word *co-alcoholic* simply refers to someone

who has developed an unhealthy pattern of relating to others as a result of having been closely involved with

someone with the disease of alcoholism. Whether the alcoholic has been a parent, spouse, child, or friend, their

relationship usually causes certain feelings and behavior to develop in the co-alcoholic: low self-esteem, a need to be

needed, a strong urge to change and control others, and a willingness to suffer. In fact, all the characteristics of

women who love too much are usually present in the daughters and wives of alcoholics and other addicts.

I already knew that the effects of a childhood spent trying to take care of and protect her alcoholic mother had

profoundly influenced how Lisa related to men later in life. I waited patiently, and soon she began to offer some

details.

She was the middle of three children, between an older sister who was the reason for her parents' hasty marriage

and a younger brother who was another surprise, born eight years after Lisa, while her mother was still drinking.

Lisa was the product of their only planned pregnancy.

"I always thought my mother was perfect, maybe because I needed so badly for her to be. I made her into the

mother I wanted and then told myself that I would be just like her. What a fantasy I lived in!" Lisa shook her head

and continued. "I was born when she and my father were most in love, so I was her favorite. Even though she said

she loved us all the same, I knew that I was very special to her. We always spent as much time together as we could.

When I was very young I guess she did take care of me, but after a while we changed roles and I started taking care of her.

“My father was horrible most of the time. He treated her rudely and gambled all our money away. He made a

good salary as an engineer, but we never had anything and we were always moving.

“You know, that little poem describes the way I wanted it to be much more than the way it really was. I’m finally

beginning to see that. All my life I wanted my mother to be the person that poem describes, but most of the time she

wasn’t able to even come close to being my ideal mother because she was drunk. Very early, I began pouring all my

love and devotion and energy into her, hoping to get back what I needed from her, to get back what I was giving.”

Lisa paused and her eyes clouded for a moment. “I’m learning all this in therapy, and sometimes it hurts a lot to look

at how it really was instead of how I always thought I could make it be.

“My mother and I were so close, but very early—so early I can’t remember when it happened—I began to act like

I was the mother and she was the child. I worried about her and tried to protect her from my father. I did little things

to cheer her up. I tried hard to make her happy because she was all I had. I knew she cared for me because often she

would tell me to come sit by her and we'd stay that way for a long time, snuggled up together and not really talking,

just holding on to each other. Now, when I look back, I realize I was always afraid for her, always waiting for

something awful to happen—something that I should have been able to prevent if only I'd been careful enough.

That's a tough way to live when you're growing up, but I never knew anything else. And it took its toll. By the time

I was a teenager, I was having serious episodes of depression.”

Lisa laughed softly. “What scared me most about the depression was that I couldn't take very good care of my

mother when I was in the middle of it. You see, I was very conscientious ... and so afraid of letting go of her, even

for a little while. The only way I could let go of her was by grabbing on to someone else.”

She brought the tea on a red-and-black lacquered tray and placed it on the floor before us.

“When I was nineteen, I had the opportunity to go to Mexico with two girlfriends. It was absolutely the first time I

had ever left my mother. We were to stay three weeks, and the second week I was there I met this terrifically

handsome Mexican man who spoke beautiful English and was very gallant and attentive to me. By the third week of

my vacation he was asking me daily to marry him. He said he was in love with me and couldn't bear the thought of

being without me now that he'd found me. Well, that was probably the perfect argument to use with me. I mean, he

was saying he *needed* me, and everything in me responded to being needed. Besides, I think I knew at some level

that I had to get away from my mother. It was so dark and dreary and grim at home. And this man was promising me

a wonderful life. His family was wealthy. He had a fine education. He didn't do anything that I could see, but I

thought that was because they had so much money he didn't have to work. That he had all that money available to

him and still thought he needed me to make him happy made me feel terribly important and worthwhile.

"I called my mother and described him in glowing terms to her. She said, 'I trust you to make the right decision.'

Well, she shouldn't have. I decided to marry him, which was definitely a mistake.

"You see, I had no idea how I felt about anything. I didn't know if I loved him or if he was what I wanted. I just

knew that finally here was someone saying *he* loved *me*. I'd done very little dating, knew almost nothing about men.

I'd been too busy taking care of things at home. I was so empty inside, and here was this person offering me what

seemed like so much. And he said he *loved* me. I'd been doing all the loving for so long, and now it seemed as if it

was my turn to be on the receiving end. And just in time. I knew I was almost totally drained, that I had nothing left

to give.

“Well, we were married quickly, without his parents’ knowledge. It sounds so crazy now, but at the time it all

seemed to show how much he loved me—that he was willing to defy his parents to be with me. I thought then that

he was rebelling by marrying me, just enough of a rebellion to make his parents angry, but not enough so they’d

throw him out. I see it differently now. After all, he had secrets to keep about his sexual identity and behavior, and

having a wife made him look more “normal” than not having one. I guess that was what he meant when he said he

needed me. And of course I was a perfect choice, because being an American I would always, in his culture, be

wrong, be suspect. Any other woman, especially one from his social class, seeing what I saw would have told

someone sooner or later. Then it would have been all over town. But who was I going to tell? Who ever talked to

me? And who would believe me?

“I don’t think any of this was deliberate or calculated on his part, though, any more than my reasons for marrying

him were. We just fit together and we thought, at first, it was love.

“Anyway, after the wedding, guess what? We had to go home and live with these people who hadn’t even been

informed we were marrying! Oh, it was dreadful. They hated me and I got the feeling they had been angry with him

for quite some time already. I couldn't speak a word of Spanish. His whole family could speak English, but they

wouldn't. I was totally shut out and isolated, and terribly afraid right from the beginning. He left me alone in the

evenings a lot, so I just stayed in our room, and finally learned to go to sleep whether he came home or not. I already

knew how to suffer. I'd learned that at home. Somehow, I thought this was the price you paid to be with someone

who loved you, that it was normal.

"He often came home drunk, and amorous, and that was really awful. I could smell other women's perfume on

him.

"One night I'd already been asleep a long time and some noise woke me. There was my husband, drunk, admiring

himself in front of the mirror, in my nightgown. I asked him what he was doing and he said, 'Don't you think I look

pretty?' He made a little face and I saw he was wearing lipstick.

"Finally, something snapped. I knew I had to get out of there. Up until then I had been miserable, but I was sure it

was my fault, that somehow I could be more loving and make him want to stay with me, make him get his parents to

acknowledge me, to like me, even. I was willing to try harder, just like with my mother. But this was different. This

was crazy.

“I had no money and no way of getting any, so the next day I told him I would tell his parents what he’d done if

he didn’t take me to San Diego. I lied and told him I had already called my mother and she was expecting to meet

me, and that if he would just take me there I’d never bother him again. I don’t know where I got the courage because

I actually thought he might kill me or something, but it worked. He was so afraid of his parents knowing, you see.

He drove me to the border without a word and gave me bus fare to San Diego and about fifteen dollars. So I ended

up in San Diego at a friend’s house. I stayed there until I got a job and then I got a place with three roommates and

began a pretty wild lifestyle.

“By now I had absolutely no feelings of my own. I was completely numb. But I still had this tremendous

compassion, which got me into a lot of trouble. I went home with a great many men during the next three or four

years because I felt sorry for them. I’m lucky things didn’t ever get really out of hand. Most of the men I got

involved with had drug or alcohol problems. I met them at parties or, occasionally, in bars, and again, they seemed

to need me to understand them, to help them, which was like a magnet for me.”

Lisa’s attraction to men of this type made perfect sense in terms of her history with her mother. The closest thing

to being loved that Lisa had experienced was being needed, so when a man appeared to need her he was, in effect,

offering her love. He did not have to be kind, or giving, or caring. That he was needy was enough to stir the old,

familiar feelings in her and kindle her care-giving response.

Her story continued. “My life was a mess, and so was my mother’s. It would be difficult to say which of us was

sicker. I was twenty-four when my mother got sober. She did it the hard way. All by herself, alone in her living

room, she made that phone call to A.A. and asked for help. They sent two people over to talk to her and they took

her to a meeting that afternoon. She hasn’t had a drink since.”

Lisa smiled softly at her mother’s courage.

“It must have really gotten unbearable because she was a very proud lady, too proud to call unless she was

desperate. Thank God I wasn’t there to see it. I probably would have worked so hard to make her feel better that she

never would have gotten real help.

“My mother had started drinking really heavily when I was about nine. I would come home from school and she

would be lying on the couch, passed out, with a bottle next to her. My older sister used to get angry with me and tell

me that I wouldn’t look at reality because I would never admit how bad it was, but I loved my mother too much to

even let myself notice that she was doing anything wrong.

“We were so close, she and I. So when things began to fall apart between her and my dad, I wanted to make it up

to her. Her happiness was the most important thing in the world to me. I felt I had to make it all up to her for what

my father was doing that hurt her, and the only thing I knew how to do was be good. So, I was good in every way I

knew how. I would ask her if she needed help with anything. I cooked and cleaned without being asked. I tried not

to need anything for myself.

“But nothing worked. I realize now that I was taking on two incredibly powerful forces: my parents’ deteriorating

marriage and my mother’s advancing alcoholism. I didn’t have a chance of making it right, but that didn’t keep me

from trying—and from blaming myself when I failed.

“Her unhappiness hurt me so, you see. And I knew there were still areas where I could improve. My schoolwork,

for instance. I wasn’t doing too well because, of course, I was under a lot of pressure at home, what with trying to

take care of my brother and fixing meals and finally getting a job to help out. In school I only had energy for one

brilliant accomplishment a year. I would plan carefully and bring it off to show the teachers I wasn’t dumb. But the

rest of the time I barely squeaked by. They said I wasn’t really trying. Ha! They didn’t know how hard I was trying

—to hold everything together at home. But the report cards weren’t good, and my father would yell and my mother

would cry. I blamed myself for not being perfect. And I kept trying harder than ever.”

In a severely dysfunctional home such as this, where there are apparently insurmountable difficulties, the family

will focus on other, simpler problems that hold some promise of being solvable. Lisa’s schoolwork and grades thus

became everyone’s focus, including Lisa’s. The family needed to believe that this problem was one which, if

rectified, would bring harmony.

The pressure on Lisa was intense. Not only was she trying to solve her parents’ problems while saddled with her

mother’s responsibilities, she was also identified as a cause of this unhappiness. Because of the monumental

proportions of her task, she never experienced success, in spite of her heroic efforts. Naturally, her sense of self-

worth suffered terribly.

“One time I called my best friend and said to her, ‘Please let me talk to you. You can read a book if you want.

You don’t have to listen to me. I just need someone on the other end of the phone.’ I didn’t believe that I even

deserved to have someone listen to my problems! But she did listen, of course. Her father was a recovering alcoholic

who went to A.A. She went to Alateen and I think she gave me the benefit of that program just in the way she

listened to me. It was so hard for me to admit anything was wrong, unless it was my father’s fault. I really hated

him.”

Lisa and I sipped our tea in silence for a few moments while she struggled silently with bitter memories. When

she could continue, she said simply, “My father left us when I was sixteen. My sister was already gone. She was

three years older than I, and as soon as she turned eighteen she got a full-time job and left home. That left just my

mother, my brother, and me. I think that I was beginning to go under with the pressure I put on myself to keep her

safe and happy, and to take care of my brother. So I went to Mexico and got married, came home and got divorced,

and then ran around with a lot of men for years.

“It was about five months after my mother got into the A.A. program that I met Gary. The first day I spent time

with him he was stoned. We rode around in the car with my girlfriend, who knew him, and he was smoking a joint.

He liked me and I liked him, and we both separately passed on that information through my girlfriend, so pretty

soon he called me and came over to visit me. I had him sit for me while I sketched him just for fun, and I remember

becoming overwhelmed with feeling for him. It was the most powerful sensation regarding a man I’d ever had.

“He was stoned again, and he was sitting there talking slowly—you know, the way people do on pot—and I had

to stop drawing because my hands started shaking so hard I couldn’t do anything. I held the sketch pad up at an

angle, leaning it against my knees for stability, so he couldn't see my hands shake like that.

“Today I know that what I was responding to was the fact that he talked just like my mother did when she'd been

drinking all day. The same long pauses and carefully selected words that came out sort of overemphasized. All the

caring and love that I felt for my mother were combined with my physical attraction to him as a good-looking man.

But at that time I had no idea why I was responding the way I did, so of course I called it love.”

That Lisa's attraction to and involvement with Gary began so soon after her mother stopped drinking was not a

coincidence. The tie between the two women had never been broken. Even though considerable geographic distance

separated them, her mother had always been Lisa's first responsibility and deepest attachment. When Lisa realized

that her mother was changing, recovering from alcoholism without her help, she reacted out of fear at not being

needed. Soon Lisa established a new relationship of depth with another addictive individual. After her marriage, her

involvements with men had been casual, until her mother's sobriety. She “fell in love” with an addict when her

mother turned to members of Alcoholics Anonymous for help and support in getting well. Lisa needed a relationship

with an actively addictive person in order to feel “normal.”

She went on to describe the six-year relationship that followed. Gary moved in with her almost at once and stated

clearly during their first couple of weeks together that if there were ever a choice to be made between buying dope

and paying the rent, the dope would always come first with him. Lisa, though, was sure he would change, that he

would come to value what they had together and want to preserve it. She was sure she could make him love her the

way she loved him.

Gary rarely worked and when he did, true to his word, his income went for the most expensive marijuana or

hashish. Lisa joined him in his drug use at first, but when she found it interfered with her ability to earn a living she

stopped. She was, after all, responsible for supporting them both, and she took her responsibility seriously.

Whenever she thought about telling him to leave—after he'd taken money from her purse again or there was a party

going on in their apartment when she came home, exhausted from work, or he hadn't come home all night—he

would buy a bag of groceries or have dinner waiting for her or tell her he had gotten some cocaine especially for

them to share, and her resolve would melt while she said to herself that he really did love her after all.

His stories of his childhood would make her cry with pity for him, and Lisa was sure, if she loved him enough,

that she could make up for all that he had suffered. She felt she must not blame him or hold him responsible for his

behavior now, since he'd been so damaged as a child, and she quite forgot her own painful past as she concentrated

on remedying his.

Once, during an argument when she refused to give him a check her father had sent her for a birthday present, he

plunged a knife into every canvas in the apartment.

Lisa continued with her story. "I was getting so sick by then that I actually thought, This is my fault; I shouldn't

have made him so *angry*. I was still taking the blame for everything, trying to fix the unfixable.

"The next day was Saturday. Gary was gone for a while and I was cleaning up the mess, crying and throwing out

three years' worth of paintings. I had the television on to distract myself, and this woman who had been beaten by

her husband was being interviewed. You couldn't see her face, but she was talking about how her life had been and

she described some pretty awful scenes and then said, 'I didn't think it was that bad because I could still stand it.'"

Lisa shook her head slowly. "That's what I was doing, staying in this terrible situation because I could still stand

it. When I heard that woman, I said, aloud, 'But you deserve something more than the worst thing you can stand!'

And suddenly I heard myself and I started crying really hard because I realized, so did I. I deserved more than the

pain and the frustration and the expense and the chaos. With every ruined painting I said to myself, *I won't live this*

way anymore.”

When Gary came home, his things were packed and waiting for him outside the front door. Lisa had called her

best friend, who brought her husband with her, and the couple helped Lisa to have the courage to tell Gary to leave.

“There wasn’t a scene because my friends were there, so he just left. Later he started calling me and threatening

me, but I wouldn’t respond in any way, so after a while he gave up.

“I want you to understand, though, that I didn’t do it by myself—not respond, I mean. I called my mother that

afternoon, after all the dust had settled, and told her the whole story. She told me to begin going to Al-Anon

meetings for adult children of alcoholics. It was only because I was in so much pain that I listened to her.”

Al-Anon, like Alateen, is a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who come together to help one

another and themselves recover from their obsession with the alcoholic in their lives. Adult-children meetings are

for the grown sons and daughters of alcoholics who want to recover from the effects of having lived as children with

alcoholism. Those effects include most of the characteristics of loving too much.

“That was when I began to understand myself. Gary, for me, was what alcohol had been for my mother: he was a

drug that I couldn't do without. Until the day I made him leave, I had always been terrified that he would go away,

so I did everything I could to please him. I did all the things that I'd done as a child—work hard, be good, not ask

for anything for myself, and take care of what was someone else's responsibility.

“Because self-sacrifice had always been my pattern, I wouldn't have known who I was without someone to help

or some suffering to endure.”

Lisa's deep attachment to her mother, and the great sacrifice of her own needs and wants that this attachment

required, prepared her for later love relationships that involved suffering rather than any kind of personal fulfillment.

She had made a profound decision as a child that she would rectify any difficulty in her mother's life through the

power of her own love and selflessness. That decision soon became unconscious, but it continued to drive her.

Totally unaccustomed to assessing ways of securing her own well-being but expert in promoting the well-being of

others, she moved into relationships that held the promise of another opportunity to make everything right for

another person through the force of her love. True to her history, failure to win that love through her efforts only

made her try harder.

Gary, with his addiction, his emotional dependency, and his cruelty, combined all the worst attributes of Lisa's

mother and father. Ironically, that accounted for her attraction to him. If the relationship we had with our parents

was essentially a nurturing one, with appropriate expressions of affection, interest, and approval, then as adults we

tend to feel comfortable with people who engender similar feelings of security, warmth, and positive self-regard.

Further, we will tend to avoid people who make us feel less positive about ourselves through their criticism or

manipulation of us. Their behavior will be aversive for us.

However, if our parents related to us in hostile, critical, cruel, manipulative, overbearing, overdependent, or

otherwise inappropriate ways, that is what will feel “right” to us when we meet someone who expresses, perhaps

very subtly, undertones of the same attitudes and behaviors. We will feel at home with people with whom our earlier

unhealthy patterns of relating are re-created, and perhaps awkward and ill at ease with gentler, kinder, or otherwise

healthier individuals. Or else, because the challenge of trying to change someone in order to make that person happy

or to gain withheld affection or approval is missing, we may simply experience ourselves as feeling bored with

healthier people. Boredom often covers mild to intense feelings of awkwardness, which women who love too much

tend to feel when out of the familiar role of helping, hoping, and paying more attention to someone else’s welfare

than to their own. There is in most adult children of alcoholics, and in offspring from other kinds of dysfunctional

homes as well, a fascination with people who spell trouble and an addiction to excitement, especially negative

excitement. If drama and chaos have always been present in our lives, and if, as is so often the case, we were forced

to deny many of our own feelings while growing up, we often require dramatic events to engender any feeling at all.

Thus, we need the excitement of uncertainty, pain, disappointment, and struggle just to feel alive.

Lisa ended her story. “The peace and quiet of my life after Gary left drove me wild. It took everything I had not to

call him and start it all over again. But I slowly got used to a more normal life.

“I’m not dating anyone now. I know that I’m still too sick to have a healthy relationship with a man. I’d go right

out and find another Gary. So I’m making *myself* my project for the first time, rather than trying to change someone

else.”

Lisa, in relation to Gary, like her mother in relation to alcohol, suffered from a disease process, a destructive

compulsion over which she had no control by herself. Just as her mother had developed an addiction to alcohol and

was unable to stop drinking on her own, so Lisa had developed what was also an addictive relationship with Gary. I

do not make this analogy, or use the word *addictive* lightly, in comparing the two women's situations. Lisa's mother

had become dependent on a drug—alcohol—to avoid experiencing the intense anguish and despair that her life

situation held for her. The more she used alcohol to avoid feeling her pain, the more the drug operated on her

nervous system to produce the very feelings she was trying to avoid. It ultimately increased rather than diminished

the pain. So of course she drank even more. Thus, she spiraled into addiction.

Lisa, too, was attempting to avoid anguish and despair. She suffered from a profound underlying depression, the

roots of which traced back to her painful childhood. This underlying depression is a common factor in children from

all types of severely dysfunctional homes, and their ways of dealing with it, or more typically, avoiding it, vary

depending on their sex, their disposition, and their childhood role in the family. By the time they reach their teen

years, many young women, like Lisa, keep their depression at bay through developing the style of loving too much.

As they engage in chaotic but stimulating and distracting interactions with unhealthy men, they are too excited to

sink into the depression that lingers just under the level of awareness.

In this way, a cruel, indifferent, dishonest, or otherwise difficult partner becomes for these women the equivalent

of a drug, creating a means of avoiding their own feelings—just as alcohol and other mood-altering substances

create for drug addicted persons a temporary avenue of escape, and one from which they dare not be separated. And

as with alcohol and drugs, these unmanageable relationships that provide the needed distraction also contribute their

own cargo of pain. In a parallel with the developing disease of alcoholism, dependence on the relationship deepens

to the point of addiction. To be without the relationship—that is, to be alone with one's self—can be experienced as

worse than being in the greatest pain the relationship produces, because to be alone means to feel the stirrings of the

great pain from the past combined with that of the present.

The two addictions are parallel in this way, and equally difficult to overcome. A woman's addiction to her

partner, or to a series of unsuitable partners, may owe its genesis to a variety of family problems. Ironically, adult

children of alcoholics are more fortunate than those from other dysfunctional backgrounds because, at least in the

larger cities, Al-Anon groups often exist to support them as they work through their problems with self-esteem and

with relationships.

Recovery from relationship addiction involves getting help from an appropriate support group in order to break

the cycle of addiction, and to learn to seek feelings of self-worth and well-being from sources other than a man

unable to foster those feelings. The key is in learning how to live a healthy, satisfying, and serene life without being

dependent on another person for happiness.

Sadly, for those enmeshed in addictive relationships and those caught in the web of chemical addiction, the

conviction that they can handle the problem by themselves often prevents them from seeking help and thus

precludes the possibility of recovery.

It is because of this conviction—"I can do it on my own"—that things sometimes must get so much worse before

they can begin to get better for so many people struggling with either of these diseases of addiction. Lisa's life had

to become hopelessly unmanageable before she could admit that she needed help to overcome her addiction to pain.

And Lisa's condition wasn't helped any by the fact that both suffering for love and being addicted to a

relationship are romanticized by our culture. From popular songs to opera, from classical literature to Harlequin

romances, from daily soap operas to critically acclaimed movies and plays, we are surrounded by countless

examples of unrewarding, immature relationships that are glorified and glamorized. Over and over again we are

instructed by these cultural models that the depth of love can be measured by the pain it causes and that those who

truly suffer, truly love. When a singer plaintively croons about not being able to stop loving someone even though it

hurts so much, there is, perhaps because of the sheer force of repeated exposure to this point of view, something in

us that accepts that what the singer expresses is the way it *should* be. We accept that suffering is a natural part of

love and that the willingness to suffer for the sake of love is a positive rather than a negative trait.

Very few models exist of people relating as peers in healthy, mature, honest, nonmanipulative, and

nonexploitative ways, probably for two reasons: First, in all honesty, such relationships in real life are fairly rare.

Second, since the quality of emotional interplay in healthy relationships is often much subtler than the blatant drama

of unhealthy relationships, its dramatic potential is usually overlooked in literature, drama, and songs. If unhealthy

styles of relating plague us, perhaps it is because that is very nearly all we see and all we know.

Because of the dearth of examples of mature love and healthy communication in the media, I have been

entertaining a fantasy for years of taking over the script writing for one day's episode on each of the major soap

operas. In my episode, all the characters would communicate with one another in honest, nondefensive, and caring

ways. No lies, no secrets, no manipulations, no one who is willing to be someone else's victim, and no one doing the

victimizing. Instead, for one day viewers would see people who are committed to having healthy relationships with

each other, based on genuine communication.

This style of relating would not only conflict sharply with the normal format of these programs but would also

illustrate, by way of extreme contrast, how saturated we are with depictions of exploitation, manipulation, sarcasm,

revenge seeking, deliberate baiting, piquing of jealousy, lying, threatening, coercing, and so on—none of which

contribute to healthy interplay. When you think about what one segment portraying honest communication and

mature love would do to the quality of these continuing sagas, consider also what the same alteration in

communication style would do in each of our lives.

Everything happens in a context, including the way we love. We need to be aware of the damaging shortcomings

of our societal view of love and to resist the shallow and self-defeating immaturity in personal relationships that it

glamorizes. We need to consciously develop a more open and mature way of relating than what our cultural media

seem to endorse, thus trading turmoil and excitement for a deeper intimacy.

4

The Need to Be Needed

She's a good hearted woman

In love with a good timin' man;

She loves him in spite of his wicked ways

That she don't understand.

—“*Good Hearted Woman*”

“I don't know how she does it all. I'd go crazy if I had to cope with what she copes with.”

“You know, I've never heard her complain!”

“Why does she put up with it?”

“What does she see in him, anyway? She could do so much better.”

People tend to say these kinds of things about a woman who loves too much, as they observe what appear to be

her noble efforts to make the best of a seemingly unrewarding situation. But clues that explain the mystery of her

devoted attachment can usually be found in her childhood experiences. Most of us grow up and continue in the roles

we adopted in our families of origin. For many women who love too much, those roles often meant that we denied

our own needs while trying to meet the needs of other family members. Perhaps we were forced by circumstances to

grow up too fast, prematurely taking on adult responsibilities because our mother or father was too sick physically or

emotionally to carry out the appropriate parental functions. Or perhaps a parent was absent due to death or divorce

and we tried to fill in, helping to take care of both our siblings and our remaining parent. Maybe we became the

mommy at home while our own mother worked to support the family. Or we might have lived with both parents, but

because one was angry or frustrated or unhappy and the other would not respond sympathetically, we found

ourselves in the role of confidante, hearing details of their relationship that were too much for us to handle

emotionally. We listened because we were afraid of the consequences to the suffering parent if we didn't, and afraid

of the loss of love if we failed to fill the role proscribed for us. And so we didn't protect ourselves, and our parents

didn't protect us either, because they needed to see us as stronger than we were. Even though we were too immature

for the responsibility, we ended up protecting them. When this happened, we learned too young and too well how to

take care of everyone but ourselves. Our own needs for love, attention, nurturing, and security went unmet while we

pretended to be more powerful and less fearful, more grown up and less needy, than we really felt. And having

learned to deny our own yearning to be taken care of, we grew up looking for more opportunities to do what we had

become so good at: being preoccupied with someone else's wants and demands rather than acknowledging our own

fear and pain and unmet needs. We've been pretending to be grown up for so long, asking for so little and doing so

much, that now it seems too late to take our turn. So we help and help, and hope that our fear will go away and our

reward will be love.

Melanie's story is a case in point, an example of how growing up too fast with too much responsibility—in this

case, filling in for an absent parent—can create a compulsion to nurture.

The day we met, right after a lecture I had given to a group of nursing students, I couldn't help but notice that her

face was a study in contrasts. The small, upturned nose with its splash of freckles and the deeply dimpled cheeks of

buttermilk skin gave her an appealingly impish air. Those sprightly features seemed out of place on the same

countenance that displayed such dark circles beneath her clear gray eyes. From under a cap of dark auburn waves

she looked like a pale, tired pixie.

She had waited off to one side as I spoke at some length with each of the half-dozen nursing students who had

lingered behind once my lecture had ended. As frequently happened whenever I spoke on the subject of the family

disease of alcoholism, several students wanted to discuss matters too personal for the usual question-answer chat

period following my presentation.

When the last of her classmates had gone, Melanie allowed me a moment's hiatus and then introduced herself,

shaking my hand warmly and firmly for someone as slight and delicate as she was.

She had waited so long and so patiently to speak to me that, in spite of her apparent self-assuredness, I suspected a

depth of feeling had been tapped by the morning's lecture. To give her an opportunity to talk at length, I invited her

to join me in a walk across campus. As I gathered my belongings and we left the lecture hall, she chatted

companionably, but once we were outside in the gray November noon she became quietly reflective.

We walked along a deserted path, the only sound the powdery crackle of fallen sycamore leaves, brittle beneath

our feet.

Melanie fell out of step to scuff at a couple of the ragged star-shapes, their pointed tips curling upward like dried

starfish, exposing their pale undersides. After a while she said softly, "My mother wasn't an alcoholic, but from

what you described this morning about the way that disease affects a family, she might as well have been. She was

mentally ill—really very crazy—and it finally killed her. She suffered from deep depressions, went to the hospital a

lot, and sometimes stayed away a long time. The drugs they used to 'cure' her just seemed to make her worse.

Instead of an alert crazy woman, she became a zoned-out crazy woman. But as zonked as those drugs kept her, she

finally managed to make one of her suicide attempts stick. Although we tried never to leave her by herself, that day

we had all gone off in different directions just for a little while. She hanged herself in the garage. My father found

her."

She shook her head quickly, unsettling the dark memories that were gathering there, and continued. “I heard a lot

that I could identify with this morning, but you said in your lecture that children of alcoholics or from other

dysfunctional homes like ours very often choose partners who are alcoholic or addicted to other drugs, and that’s not

true of Sean. He doesn’t care much about drinking or getting loaded, thank God. But we do have other problems.”

She looked away from me, lifting her chin.

“I can usually handle anything ...”—the chin lowered—“... but it’s beginning to get to me.” Then she looked

squarely at me, smiled, and shrugged. “I’m running out of food and money and time, that’s all.” She said this as

though it were the punch line of a joke, to be responded to with amusement, not to be taken seriously. I had to prod

her for the details, which she reported matter-of-factly.

“Sean’s gone again. We have three children: Susie, six; Jim-my, four; and Peter, who is two and a half. I’m

working part-time as a ward clerk, going for my R.N. in nursing school, and trying to keep it all together at home.

Sean usually watches the kids when he’s not in art school, or gone.” She said this without a trace of bitterness.

“We were married seven years ago. I was seventeen and right out of high school. He was twenty-four, doing some

acting and going to school part-time. He had an apartment with three friends. I used to go over on Sundays and make

them all these great feasts. I was his Sunday night date. Fridays and Saturdays he was either doing a stage

performance or seeing someone else. Anyway, they all loved me at that apartment. My cooking was the greatest

thing that happened to them all week. They used to tease Sean, tell him he ought to marry me and let me take care of

him. I guess he liked the idea because that's what he did. He asked me to marry him and of course I said yes. I was

thrilled. He was so handsome. Look!" She opened her purse and took out a little sheaf of plastic-encased

photographs. The first one was of Sean: dark eyes, chiseled cheekbones, and a deeply cleft chin combined in a

broodingly handsome face. It was a wallet-size version of what looked like a photograph taken for an actor's or

model's portfolio. I asked whether this was the case, and Melanie confirmed that it was, naming a well-known

photographer who had done the work.

"He looks like a perfect Heathcliff," I observed, and she nodded proudly. We looked together at the other

pictures, which showed three children in various stages of their development: crawling, taking tottering steps,

blowing out birthday candles. Hoping to see a less posed photograph of Sean, I commented that he wasn't in any of

the children's pictures.

"No, he usually takes the pictures. He's had quite a background in photography as well as acting and art."

“Does he work in any of those fields now?” I asked.

“Well, no. His mother sent him some money so he took off for New York again, to see what opportunities there

are for him there.” Her voice dropped almost imperceptibly.

Given her obvious loyalty to Sean, I would have expected Melanie to sound hopeful regarding this foray to New

York. Since she did not, I asked, “Melanie, what is it?”

With the first trace of complaint, she said, “The problem isn’t our marriage. It’s his mother. She keeps sending

him money. Every time he’s about to settle down with us, or is sticking to a job for a change, she’ll send him a

check and off he goes. She can’t say no to him. If she’d just stop giving him money, we’d be all right.”

“What if she never stops?” I asked.

“Then Sean will have to change. I’ll make him see how he’s hurting us.” Tears appeared on her dark lashes.

“He’ll have to refuse when she offers him money.”

“Melanie, that doesn’t sound too likely from what you’re telling me.”

Her voice rose and became more determined. “She’s not going to ruin this thing. He will change.”

Melanie found an especially large leaf and for the next several steps she kicked it ahead of her, watching it

disintegrate.

I waited a few moments and then asked, “Is there more?”

Still kicking away, Melanie answered, “He’s been to New York lots of times and he has someone else he sees

when he’s there.” Softly again, and again matter-of-factly.

“Another woman?” I asked, and Melanie looked away as she nodded. “How long has he been involved?”

“Oh, years, really.” At this point Melanie actually shrugged. “It started with my first pregnancy. I almost didn’t

blame him. I was so sick and miserable and he was so far away.”

Amazingly, Melanie assumed the blame for Sean’s infidelity to her, as well as the burden of supporting him and

their children while he dabbled at various careers. I asked her if she had ever considered divorce.

“Actually, we did separate once. That’s silly to say, because we’re separated all the time, with his going off the

way he does. But once I said I wanted a separation, mostly to teach him a lesson, and so for almost six months we

really were apart. He’d still call me, and I would send him money when he needed it, if some opportunity were

about to break and he needed something to tide him over until it did. But for the most part we were each on our own.

I even met two other men!” Melanie sounded surprised that other men would be interested in her. She puzzled,

“Both of them were so nice to the children, and they each wanted to help me around the house, fixing up what

needed repairing and even buying me little things that I needed. It was nice having them treat me that way. But the

feelings were just never really there on my part. I could never feel anything like the attraction that I still felt for

Sean. So eventually I went back to him.” She grinned. “Then I had to explain to him why everything was in such

good shape at home.”

We were halfway across the campus and I wanted to know more about what Melanie’s childhood had been like,

to understand the experiences that had prepared her for the hardship of her present situation.

“When you remember yourself as a child, what do you see?” I asked and watched her brow furrow as she looked

back through the years.

“Oh, that’s funny! I see myself in my apron, standing on a stool in front of the stove, stirring a pot. I was the

middle child of five, and I was fourteen when my mother died, but I started cooking and cleaning long before that,

because she was so sick. She just never came out of the back room after a while. My two older brothers got jobs

after school to help out and I sort of took over as mother for everybody. My two sisters were three and five years

younger than I, so it was up to me to do almost everything at home. But we managed okay. Daddy worked and

shopped. I cooked and cleaned. We did all we could. Money was always scarce, but we made do. Daddy worked

awfully hard, frequently holding down two jobs. So he was gone from home much of the time. I think he stayed

away partly because he had to, and partly to avoid my mother. We all avoided her as much as we could. She was so

difficult.

“My father remarried when I was a senior in high school. Things immediately became easier because his new

wife worked too and had a daughter the same age as my youngest sister, who was twelve then. Everything just

blended together. Money wasn’t such a problem. Dad was much happier. There was enough to go around for really

the first time.”

I asked, “What were your feelings about your mother’s death?”

Melanie set her jaw. “The person who died had not been my mother for many years. She was someone else—

some—one who slept or screamed and made trouble. I remember her when she was still my mother, but it’s vague. I

have to go way back to someone who was soft and sweet and used to sing while she worked or played with us. You

know, she was Irish and she would sing such melancholy songs.... Anyway, I think we were relieved when she

finally died. But I felt guilty, too, that maybe if I’d only understood her better or cared more she wouldn’t have

gotten so sick. I don’t think about it if I can help it.”

We were nearing my destination, and in the few moments we had left I hoped to help Melanie see at least a

glimpse of the origin of her troubles in the present.

“Do you see any similarities between your life as a child and now?” I asked.

She gave an uncomfortable little laugh. “More than ever before, just talking about it now. I see how I’m still

waiting—for Sean to come home, just as I waited for my father when he was gone—and I realize how I never blame

Sean for what he’s doing because I’ve got his going away all mixed up in my mind with my father going away so

that he could take care of us all. I can see how it’s not the same thing, and yet I feel the same way about it, as if I

should just make the best of it.”

She paused, squinting to look harder at the patterns unfolding before her.

“Oh, and I’m still the brave little

Melanie, holding it all together, stirring the pot on the stove, taking care of the children.” Her creamy cheeks flushed

pink with the shock of recognition. “So it’s true what you said in your lecture about children like I was. We do find

people with whom we can play the same roles we did when we were growing up!”

As we parted, Melanie hugged me hard and said, “Thanks for listening. I just needed to talk about it a little, I

guess. And I do understand better, but I’m not ready to quit—not yet!” Her spirits were obviously lighter as she said,

chin up again, “Besides, Sean just needs to grow up. And he will. He’s got to, don’t you think?”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and strode through the fallen leaves.

Melanie's insight had indeed deepened, but many other similarities between her childhood and her present life still

remained outside her awareness.

Why would a bright, attractive, energetic, and capable young woman like Melanie need a relationship so fraught

with pain and hardship as was hers with Sean? Because for her and other women who have grown up in deeply

unhappy homes, where the emotional burdens were too heavy and the responsibilities too great, for these women

what feels good and what feels bad have become confused and entangled and finally one and the same.

For instance, in Melanie's home, parental attention was negligible due to the general unmanageability of life as

the family tried to cope with the mother's disintegrating personality. Melanie's heroic efforts to manage the

household were rewarded with the closest thing to love she was to experience: her father's grateful dependency on

her. The feelings of fear and being burdened that would be natural to a child in such circumstances were

overshadowed by her sense of competence, which grew out of her father's need for her help and her mother's

inadequacy. Heady stuff for a child, to be treated as stronger than one parent and indispensable to the other! This

childhood role formed her identity as a savior who could rise above difficulty and chaos, rescuing those around her

through her courage, strength, and indomitable will.

This savior complex sounds healthier than it is. While to have strength in a crisis is laudable, Melanie, like other

women of similar backgrounds, *needed* crises in order to function. Without uproar, stress, or a desperate situation to

manage, the buried childhood feelings of being emotionally overwhelmed would surface and become too

threatening. As a child Melanie was her father's helper, as well as mother to the other children. But she was also a

child in need of parenting, and since her mother was too disturbed emotionally and her father too unavailable, her

own needs went unmet. The other children had Melanie to fuss over them, worry about them, take care of them.

Melanie had no one. Not only was she without a mother, she also had to learn to think and act like an adult. There

was no place, no time for expressing her own panic, and soon that very lack of opportunity to take her turn

emotionally began to feel right to her. If she pretended hard enough to be a grown-up, she could manage to forget

that she was a frightened child. Soon Melanie not only functioned well in chaos, she actually required it to function

at all. The burden she shouldered helped her avoid her own panic and pain. It weighed her down and brought her

relief at the same time.

Further, the sense of worth she developed resulted from carrying responsibilities that were very nearly beyond her

capabilities as a child. She earned approval by working hard, taking care of others, and sacrificing her own wants

and needs to theirs. Thus, martyrdom also became part of her personality and combined with her savior complex to

make Melanie a virtual magnet for someone who spelled trouble, someone like Sean. It is helpful to very briefly

review some important aspects of child development in order to better understand the forces at work in Melanie's

life, because, due to the unusual circumstances of her childhood, what would have otherwise been normal feelings

and reactions became dangerously exaggerated in Melanie.

For children growing up in a nuclear family, it is natural to entertain strong wishes to be rid of the same-sex

parent so as to have the beloved opposite-sex parent all to themselves. Little boys heartily wish that Daddy would

disappear so that they could have all of Mommy's love and attention. And little girls dream of replacing their

mothers as Daddy's wife. Most parents have received "proposals" from their young children of the opposite sex that

express this yearning: A four-year-old boy says to his mother, "When I grow up I'm going to marry you, Mommy."

Or a three-year-old girl says to her father, "Daddy, let's you and me have our own house together without Mommy."

These very normal yearnings reflect some of the strongest feelings a young child experiences. Yet should something

actually happen to the envied rival, resulting in that parent's harm or absence from the family, the effect on the child

can be devastating.

When the mother in such a family is emotionally disturbed, severely and chronically ill physically, alcoholic, or

drug addicted (or otherwise physically or emotionally absent for whatever reason), then the daughter (usually the

oldest daughter, if there are two or more) is almost invariably elected to fill the position left vacant due to the

mother's illness or absence. Melanie's story exemplifies the effects of such a "promotion" on a young girl. Due to

the presence of debilitating mental illness in her mother, Melanie fell heir to the position of female head of

household. During the years when her own identity was forming, she was, in many respects, her father's partner

rather than his daughter. As they discussed and managed the problems of the household, they operated as a team. In

a sense, Melanie had her father all to herself because she had a relationship with him that was profoundly different

from what her siblings had. She was very nearly his peer. She was also, for several years, much stronger and more

stable than her sick mother. This meant that Melanie's normal childhood wishes to have her father all to herself were

realized, but at the cost of her mother's health and finally her mother's life.

What happens when one's early childhood wishes to be rid of the same-sex parent and obtain the opposite-sex

parent for one's own come true? There are three extremely powerful, character-determining, and unconsciously

operating consequences.

The first is guilt.

Melanie felt guilty when she recalled her mother's suicide and her failure to prevent it, the kind of consciously

experienced guilt any family member naturally feels in the face of such a tragedy. In Melanie, this conscious guilt

was exacerbated by her overdeveloped sense of responsibility for the welfare of all her family members. But in

addition to this heavy burden of conscious guilt, she carried another even heavier load.

The realization of her childhood wishes to have her father to herself produced in Melanie an unconscious guilt in

addition to the conscious guilt she felt for not saving her mentally ill mother from suicide. This in turn generated a

drive for atonement, a need to suffer and endure hardship as expiation. This need, combined with Melanie's

familiarity with a martyr's role, created in her something close to masochism. There was comfort, if not actual

pleasure, in her relationship with Sean, with all its inherent pain, loneliness, and overwhelming responsibility.

The second consequence is unconscious feelings of discomfort at the sexual implications of having the desired

parent to oneself. Ordinarily, the presence of the mother (or, in these days of frequent divorce, another companion

and sexual partner for the father, such as a stepmother or girlfriend) provides safety for both father and daughter.

The daughter is free to develop a sense of herself as attractive and beloved in the eyes of her father, while protected

from overt acting out of the sexual impulses inevitably generated between them, by the strength of his bond with an

appropriate adult female.

An incestuous relationship did not develop between Melanie and her father, but given their circumstances it

certainly could have. The dynamics operating in their family are very frequently present when incestuous

relationships develop between fathers and daughters. When a mother, for whatever reason, abdicates her appropriate

role as her husband's partner and her child's parent, and causes a daughter to be elevated to that position, she is

forcing her daughter not only to take over her responsibilities but also to be at risk of becoming the object of the

father's sexual advances. (While this might sound as if all responsibility lies with the mother, in fact it is always the

father's complete responsibility if incest occurs. This is because, as the adult, it is his duty to protect his child rather

than to ever use her for his sexual gratification.)

Further, even if the father never approaches the daughter sexually, the lack of a strong couple bond between the

parents and the daughter's assumption of her mother's role in the family serve to heighten feelings of sexual

attraction between father and daughter. Because of their close relationship, the daughter may be uncomfortably

aware that her father's special interest in her is tinged at some level with sexual overtones. Or the unusual emotional

availability of her father may cause the daughter to focus her burgeoning sexual feelings on him more than she

would under ordinary circumstances. In an effort to avoid violating, even in thought, the powerful incest taboo, she

may numb herself to most or even all of her sexual feelings. The decision to do so is, again, unconscious, a defense

against the most threatening impulse of all: sexual attraction for a parent. Because it is unconscious, the decision is

not easily examined and reversed.

The result is a young woman who may be uncomfortable with *any* sexual feelings, because of the unconscious

taboo violations connected with them. When this happens, nurturing may be the only safe expression of love.

Melanie's primary mode of relating to Sean was to feel responsible for him. This had long since become her way

of feeling and expressing love.

When she was seventeen, her father "replaced" Melanie with his new wife, a marriage that she apparently

welcomed with relief. That she felt so little bitterness at the loss of her role at home was probably due in large part to

the appearance of Sean and his roommates, for whom she performed many of the same functions she had previously

performed at home. If that situation had not developed into a marriage between Sean and herself, Melanie might

have faced a profound identity crisis at this point. As it was, she immediately became pregnant, thus re-creating her

caretaking role, while Sean cooperated by beginning, like her father, to be absent much of the time.

She sent him money even when they were separated, competing with his mother to be the woman who took care

of him best. (This was a competition she had already won with her own mother, in relationship to her own father.)

When, during her separation from Sean, men appeared in her life who did not require her mothering, who in fact

attempted to reverse roles with her by offering her much-needed help, she could not relate emotionally to them. She

was only comfortable as the caregiver.

The sexual dynamics of Melanie's relationship with Sean had never provided the powerful bond between them

that his need for her caretaking did. In fact, Sean's infidelity simply provided Melanie with another reflection of her

childhood experience. Because of her advancing mental illness, Melanie's mother became an increasingly vague,

barely visible "other woman" in the back room of the house, emotionally and physically removed from Melanie's

life and thoughts. Melanie managed her relationship with her mother by keeping a distance and not thinking about

her. Later, when Sean had another love interest, this woman, too, was vague and far away, not perceived as a real

threat to what was, like her earlier relationship with her father, a somewhat asexual but practical partnership.

Remember, Sean's behavior was not unprecedented. Before they ever married, his established pattern had been to

seek other women's company while allowing Melanie to take care of his practical, less romantic needs. Melanie

knew this and yet married him.

After marriage, she began a campaign to change him through the force of her will and her love. Which brings us

to the third consequence of Melanie's realization of her childhood wishes and fantasies: her belief in her own

omnipotence.

Young children normally believe themselves, their thoughts, and their wishes to be magically powerful, the cause

of all significant events in their lives. Ordinarily, however, even though a little girl may passionately wish to be her

father's partner for life, reality teaches her that she cannot. Like it or not, she eventually must accept the fact that his

partner is her mother. This is a great lesson in her young life—that she cannot always bring about, through the

power of her will, that which she wants most. Indeed, this lesson does much to dismantle her belief in her own

omnipotence and helps her to come to terms with the limitations of her personal will.

In the case of young Melanie, however, that most powerful wish came true. She did, in many ways, replace her

mother. Apparently through the magical powers of her wishes and her will, she won her father for herself. Then,

with an undaunted belief in the power of her will to bring about what she desired, she was drawn to other difficult

and emotionally charged situations, which she also tried to magically change. The challenges she later

uncomplainingly faced, armed with only the weapon of her will—an irresponsible, immature, and unfaithful

husband, the burden of raising three children virtually alone, severe money problems, and a demanding academic

program coupled with a full-time job—all testified to this.

Sean provided Melanie with a perfect foil for her efforts to change another person through the power of her will,

just as he met the other needs fostered by her pseudo-adult role in childhood, in that he gave her ample opportunity

to suffer and endure, and to avoid sexuality while exercising her predilection for nurturing.

It should be very clear by now that Melanie was in no way a hapless victim of an unhappy marriage. Quite the

opposite. She and Sean met every one of each other's most profound psychological needs. Theirs was a perfect fit.

The fact that his mother's timely gifts of money conveniently short-circuited any drive toward growth or maturity in

Sean was certainly a problem to this marriage, but not, as Melanie chose to see it, The Problem. What was really

wrong was the fact that here were two people whose unhealthy patterns of living and attitudes toward life, though by

no means identical, meshed so well that they actually enabled each other to remain unhealthy.

Imagine these two, Sean and Melanie, as dancers in a world in which everyone is a dancer, and grows up learning

his or her individual routines. Due to particular events and personalities and, most of all, by learning the dances that

were performed with them throughout their childhoods, Sean and Melanie each developed a unique repertoire of

psychological steps, movements, and gestures.

Then one day they met and discovered that their dissimilar dances, when performed together, magically

synchronized into an exquisite duet, a perfect pas de deux of action and reaction. Each movement made by one was

responded to by the other, resulting in choreography that enabled their joined dances to flow, uninterrupted, round

and round and round.

Whenever he let go of a responsibility, she quickly picked it up. When she gathered to herself all the familiar

burdens of raising their family, he pirouetted away, allowing her plenty of room to do her caretaking. When he

searched the stage for other female companionship, she sighed with relief and danced faster to distract herself. While

he danced away, exiting offstage, she performed a perfect waiting step. Round and round and round . . .

For Melanie, it was sometimes an exciting dance, often a lonely one; occasionally it was embarrassing or

exhausting. But the last thing she wanted was to stop the dance she knew so well. The steps, the moves, all felt so

right that she was sure the name of the dance was love.

5

Shall We Dance?

“How did you come to marry him?” Now, how could you tell someone that? How he lowered his head in a self-deprecating way

and raised his eyes to look up at you coyly, the way a baby does.... How he wormed his way into your heart: sweet, adoring,

playful.... He said, "You're so strong, honey." And I believed it. I believed it!

—Marilyn French, *The Bleeding Heart*

How do women who love too much *find* the men with whom they can continue the unhealthy patterns of relating

that they developed in childhood? How, for instance, does the woman whose father was never emotionally present

find a man whose attention she continually strives for but cannot win? How does the woman from a violent home

manage to team up with a man who batters her? How does the woman raised in an alcoholic home find a man who

already has or will soon develop the disease of alcoholism? How does the woman whose mother always depended

on her emotionally find a husband who needs her to take care of him?

Out of all the possible partners they encounter, what are the cues that lead these women to the men with whom

they can perform the dance they know so well from childhood? And how do they respond (or not respond) when

they encounter a man whose behavior is healthier and less needy or immature or abusive than what they are

accustomed to, whose dance does not fit so smoothly with theirs?

It is an old cliché in the field of therapy that people often marry someone just like the mother or father with whom

they struggled while growing up. This concept is not quite accurate. It is not so much that the mate we choose is just

like Mom or Dad, but that *with* this partner we are able to feel the same feelings and face the same challenges that

we encountered growing up; we are able to replicate the atmosphere of childhood already so well known to us, and

use the same maneuvers in which we are already so practiced. This is what, for most of us, constitutes love. We feel

at home, comfortable, exquisitely “right” with the person with whom we can make all our familiar moves and feel

all our familiar feelings. *Even if the moves have never worked and the feelings are uncomfortable*, they are what we

know best. We feel that special sense of belonging with the man who allows us, as his partner, to dance the steps we

already know. It is with him that we decide to try to make a relationship work.

There is no more compelling chemistry than this feeling of mysterious familiarity when a woman and a man come

together whose patterns of behavior fit like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. If, added to this, the man offers the woman an

opportunity to grapple with and try to prevail over childhood feelings of pain and helplessness, of being unloved and

unwanted, then the attraction becomes for her virtually irresistible. In fact, the more pain from childhood, the more

powerful the drive to reenact and master that pain in adulthood.

Let’s look at why this is true. If a young child has experienced a trauma of some kind, it will appear and reappear

as a theme in his or her play activities until there is some sense of having finally mastered the experience. A child

who undergoes surgery, for example, may reenact the trip to the hospital using dolls or other toy figures, may make

himself the doctor in one such drama and the patient in another, until the fear attached to the event is sufficiently

diminished. As women who love too much, we are doing much the same thing: reenacting and reexperiencing

unhappy relationships in an attempt to make them manageable, to master them.

It follows that there really are no coincidences in relationship, no accidents in marriage. When a woman believes

that she inexplicably “had to get married” to a certain man, one she would never have deliberately chosen for her

husband, for instance, it is imperative that she examine why she chose to be intimate with that particular man, why

she ran the risk of pregnancy with him at all. Likewise, when a woman claims that she married on whim, or that she

was too young to know what she was doing, or that she wasn’t fully herself and could not make a responsible

choice, these are also excuses that merit deeper examination.

Actually she did choose, albeit unconsciously, and often with a wealth of knowledge about her future partner even

at the outset. To deny this is to deny responsibility for our choices and our lives, and such denial precludes recovery.

But how do we do it? What exactly is the mysterious process, the indefinable chemistry that is sparked between a

woman who loves too much and the man to whom she's drawn?

If the question is restated in other ways—What signals flash between a woman who needs to be needed and a man

who is looking for someone to take responsibility for him? Or between a woman who is extremely self-sacrificing

and a man who is extremely selfish? Or between a woman who defines herself as a victim and a man whose identity

is based on power and aggression? Or a woman who needs to control and a man who is inadequate?—the process

begins to lose some of its mystery. For there are definite signals, definite cues that are sent out and registered by

each of the participants in the dance. Remember, with every woman who loves too much, two factors are operating:

(1) the lock-and-key fit of her familiar patterns with his; and (2) the drive to re-create and overcome the painful

patterns from the past. Let us take a look at the first hesitant steps of that duet which informs each partner that here

is someone with whom it is going to work, to fit, to feel right.

The following stories illustrate clearly the almost subliminal exchange of information that takes place between a

woman who loves too much and the man to whom she is attracted, an exchange that instantly sets the stage for the

pattern of their relationship, their dance, from then on.

Chloe: twenty-three-year-old college student; daughter of a violent father

I grew up in a really crazy family. I know that now, but when I was young I never thought about it except to hope

that no one would ever find out about the way my father hit my mother. He hit all of us, and I guess he sort of

convinced us kids that we deserved being beaten. But I knew Mom didn't. I always used to wish he'd hit me instead

of her. I knew I could take it, but I wasn't so sure that she could. We all wanted her to leave him, but she wouldn't.

She got so little love. I always wanted to give her enough love to make her strong so she could get out, but she never

did. She died of cancer five years ago. I haven't been home or spoken to my father since the funeral. I feel that *he*

killed her, really, not the cancer. My grandmother on my father's side left each of us kids a trust fund, and that's

how I was able to go to college, which is where I met Roy.

We were in an art class together for a whole semester and never spoke to each other. When the second semester

began, several of us were together again in another class, and on the first day we all got into this heavy discussion

about relationships between men and women. Well, this guy started talking about American women being totally

spoiled, wanting to have everything their own way, and how they just used men. He was dripping with venom as he

was saying all this, and I thought, *Oh, he's really been hurt. Poor thing.* I asked him, "Do you really think that's

true?" and I started trying to prove to him somehow that women weren't all like that—that *I* wasn't like that. Look

at how I set myself up! Later on in our relationship, I would not be able to make any demands or take care of myself

in any way, or I'd be proving him right in his misogyny. And all my concern that morning in class worked. He was

hooked, too. He said, "I'll be back. I wasn't going to stick with this class, but I want to talk to you some more!" I

remember that right then there was this terrific rush, because already I felt I was making a difference to him.

In less than two months, we were living together. In four months, I was paying the rent and almost every other

bill, plus buying the groceries. But I kept trying, for two more years, to prove to him how nice I was, how I wasn't

going to hurt him the way he'd already been hurt. *I* got hurt quite a bit in the process, at first just emotionally, then

physically, too. No one could be as angry as he was at women and not want to push one of them around. Of course, I

was sure that was my fault too. It's a miracle I got out. I met a former girlfriend of his and she asked me, right out,

"Does he ever hit you?" I said, "Well, not really." I was protecting him, of course, and I didn't want to look like a

total fool, either. But I knew she knew because she'd been there, too. At first I panicked. It was the same feeling I

had as a kid—not wanting anyone to see behind the facade. Everything in me wanted to lie, to act like she had a lot

of nerve, asking such a question. But she looked at me with so much understanding that it didn't make sense to go

on pretending.

We talked a long time. She told me about a therapy group she was in where all the women were alike in that they

were all drawn to unhealthy relationships, and they were working on learning not to do that to themselves. She gave

me her phone number, and after I'd gone through two more months of hell I called her. She got me to go with her to

the group and I think it probably saved my life. Those women were just like me. They had learned to put up with

incredible amounts of pain, usually starting in childhood.

Anyway, it took me a few more months to leave him, and even with the group's support it was still very hard to

do. I had this incredible need to prove to him that he was lovable. I thought that if I could just love him enough he'd

change. Thank God I got over that, or I'd be back there again.

Chloe's attraction to Roy

When Chloe, the art student, met Roy, the misogynist, it was as though she was meeting the synthesis of her mother

and her father. Roy was angry and hated women. To win his love was to win that of her father, who was also angry

and destructive. To change him through her love was to change her mother and save her. She saw Roy as a victim of

his sick feelings and wanted to love him into becoming well. She also, like every woman who loves too much,

wanted to win in her struggle with him and with the important people he symbolized for her, her mother and father.

That is what made letting go of this destructive and unfulfilling relationship so difficult.

Mary Jane: married for thirty years to a workaholic

We met at a Christmas party. I was there with his younger brother who was my age and really liked me. Anyway,

there was Peter. He was smoking a pipe and wearing a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, and he looked so

Ivy League. I was terribly impressed. But there was also an air of melancholy about him and really that was as

attractive to me as his looks. I was sure he'd been deeply hurt at some time and I wanted to get to know him, to

know what had happened, and to "understand." I was sure he was unattainable, but I thought if I could be especially

compassionate, perhaps I could keep him talking to me. It was funny, because we did talk rather a lot that first

evening, but he never quite squared off with me, face to face. He was always at an angle, slightly preoccupied with

something else, and I kept trying to win his complete attention. What happened was that every word he spoke to me

became vitally important, almost precious, because I was sure he had better things to do.

It had been just like that with my father. When I was growing up he was never there—literally. We were quite

poor. He and my mother both worked in town and left us kids at home alone much of the time. Even on weekends he

did odd jobs. The only time I saw Dad was when he was home fixing something—the refrigerator or the radio or

something. I remember it always felt like he had his back to me, but I didn't mind because it was just so wonderful

to have him around. I used to hang around and ask him lots of questions to try and get him to pay attention to me.

Well, here I was, doing the same thing with Peter, though of course I didn't see it that way then. I remember now

how I kept trying to be in his direct line of vision and how he kept sort of puffing away at this pipe, looking off to

the side or up at the ceiling, or fiddling with keeping the pipe lit. I thought he was so very mature, with his furrowed

brow and faraway look. I was drawn like a magnet.

Mary Jane's attraction to Peter

Mary Jane's feelings about her father were not nearly as ambivalent as those of many women who love too much.

She loved her father, admired him, and yearned for his company and attention. Peter, being older and preoccupied,

instantly replicated for Mary Jane her elusive father, and winning his attention became all the more important

because, like with her father, his was so difficult to capture. Men who willingly listened to her, who were more

emotionally present and more affectionate, failed to arouse in Mary Jane the deep yearning to be loved she had felt

with her father. Peter's preoccupation offered a familiar challenge to Mary Jane, another chance to win the love of a

man who avoided her.

Peggy: raised by a hypercritical grandmother, and an emotionally unsupportive

mother; now a divorced single parent with two daughters

I never knew my father. He and my mother separated before I was born, and my mother went to work to support us

while her mother took care of us at home. Now that doesn't sound too bad, but it was. My grandmother was a

terribly cruel woman. She didn't beat my sister and me as much as she hurt us with words, every day. She would tell

us how bad we were, how much trouble we caused her, how we were "good for nothing" —that was one of her

favorite phrases. The irony was that all of her criticisms just made my sister and me try harder to be good, to be

worthwhile. My mother never protected us from her, either. Mother was too afraid Grandma would leave, and that

she wouldn't be able to go to work because there would be no one to take care of us. So she just looked the other

way when Grandma abused us. I grew up feeling so alone, so unprotected and afraid and worthless, all the while

trying to make up for being a burden. I remember I used to try to fix things that broke around the house, wanting to

save us money and earn my keep somehow.

I grew up and married at eighteen because I was pregnant. I was miserable from the start. He criticized me all the

time. Subtly at first, then more savagely. Actually, I knew I wasn't in love with him and married him anyway. I

didn't think I had any other choice. It was a fifteen-year marriage, because it took me that long to believe that being

miserable was a good enough reason to get a divorce.

I came out of that marriage desperate for someone to love me but feeling that I was worthless and a failure and

sure that I had nothing to offer a good, kind man.

The night I met Baird, it was absolutely the first time I had ever gone out dancing without a date. My girlfriend

and I had been shopping. She bought a whole outfit—pants, top, new shoes—and wanted to put them on and go out.

So we went to this disco place we'd both heard of. Some businessmen from out of town were buying us drinks and

dancing with us and that was okay—friendly, but not very exciting. Then I saw this fellow over next to the wall. He

was very tall, very slim, dressed incredibly well, and very good looking. But he also had an air of coldness about

him. I remember telling myself, *That is the most elegant, arrogant man I've ever seen.* And then, *I'll bet I could*

warm him up!

Incidentally, I can still remember the moment when I met my first husband. We were in high school and he was

lounging against the wall when he should have been in class, and I said to myself then, *He looks pretty wild. I'll bet*

I could settle him down. See, I was always trying to fix things. Anyway, I went up to Baird and asked him to dance.

He was very surprised and I guess a little flattered. We danced awhile and then he said he and his friends were

leaving to go to another place. Would I like to go? Though I was tempted, I said no, I was there to dance and that

was really all I wanted to do. I kept dancing with the businessmen and after awhile he asked me to dance again. So

we did. It was incredibly crowded in there. People were just packed in. A little later, my girlfriend and I were

leaving and he was sitting with some other people at a table in a corner. He beckoned me over and I went. He said to

me, "You have my phone number on your person." I didn't know what he was talking about. He reached over and

pulled his card out of the pocket of the pullover I was wearing. It was one of those shirts with a pouch pocket in

front and he'd put his card in there when we were coming off the dance floor the second time. I was amazed. I

hadn't even known he'd done that. And I was so thrilled to think that this handsome man had taken all that trouble.

Anyway, I gave him my card, too.

He called me a few days later and we went to lunch. He gave me this terribly disapproving look when I drove up

to meet him. My car was kind of old and I immediately felt inadequate—and then relieved that he would have lunch

with me anyway. He was very stiff and cold and I took it on myself to put him at ease, as though it was my fault

somehow. His parents were coming to town to visit him and he didn't get along with them. He recited a long list of

grievances against them, which didn't sound all that serious to me, but I tried to listen compassionately. I left that

lunch thinking that here was someone with whom I had nothing in common. I had not had a pleasant time. I had felt

uncomfortable and sort of off-balance. When he called two days later and asked me out again, I somehow felt

relieved, as though if *he* had had a good enough time to ask me out again, then everything was all right.

We never did have a really good time together. Something was always wrong and I kept trying to make it right. I

felt very tense with him and the only good times were when the tension lessened somewhat. That bit of relief from

tension passed for happiness. But somehow I was still powerfully attracted to him.

I know it sounds crazy, but I actually married this man without ever liking him. He broke off the relationship

several times before we married, saying he just couldn't be himself with me. I cannot tell you how devastating that

was. I would beg him to tell me what I needed to do to make him more comfortable. He'd just say, "You know what

you need to do." But I didn't. I nearly went crazy, trying to figure it out. Anyway, the marriage lasted only two

months. He left for good after telling me how unhappy I made him, and I've never seen him again, except once in a

while on the street. He always pretends he doesn't know me.

I don't know how to convey how obsessed I was with him. Each time he left me I felt more drawn to him, not

less. And when he came back he would say that he wanted what I had to offer him. There was no rush on earth like

that for me. I would hold him in my arms and he would cry and say what a fool he'd been. That kind of scene lasted

only one night and then things would start to disintegrate again, with me trying terribly hard to make him happy, so

he wouldn't leave again.

By the time he walked out of the marriage, I was hardly functioning. I was unable to work, or to do much at all

except sit and rock back and forth and cry. It felt like I was dying. I had to get help in order not to contact him again,

because I wanted so badly to make it turn out right, but I knew I couldn't survive another ride on that merry-go-

round.

Peggy's attraction to Baird

Peggy knew nothing about being loved, and having grown up without a father, knew virtually nothing about men,

either, certainly not kind, loving men. But she knew a great deal, from her childhood with her grandmother, about

being rejected and criticized by someone very unhealthy. She also knew how to try as hard as she could to win love

from a mother who could not, for her own reasons, give love or even protection. Her first marriage happened

because she allowed herself to be intimate with a young man whom she experienced as critical and condemning of

her, and for whom she felt little affection. Sex with him was more a struggle to win his acceptance than an

expression of her caring for him. A fifteen-year marriage to this man left her even more convinced of her inherent

unworthiness.

So strong was her need to replicate the hostile environment of her childhood and continue her struggle to win love

from those who could not give it that when she met a man who struck her as being cold, aloof, and indifferent, she

was instantly attracted to him. Here was another opportunity to change an unloving person into someone who would

finally love her. Once they became involved with each other, his infrequent hints that she was making some

headway in teaching him to love her enabled her to keep trying in spite of the devastation to her own life. Her need

to change him (and her mother and grandmother, whom he represented) was that strong.

Eleanor: sixty-five; raised by an overly possessive, divorced mother

My mother couldn't get along with any man. She divorced twice in an era when nobody divorced even once. I had

one sister, ten years older than I, and my mother said to me more than once, "Your sister was your father's girl so I

decided to have one for me." That's exactly what I was to her, a possession and an extension of herself. She didn't

believe we were separate people.

I missed my father so much after they divorced. She wouldn't let him near me, and he didn't have the will to fight

her. Nobody did. I always felt like a captive, and yet responsible for her happiness at the same time. It was very hard

for me to leave her, even though I felt like I was suffocating. I went to business college in a distant town, where I

stayed with relatives of ours. My mother was so angry she never spoke to them again.

After school ended, I was working as a secretary in the police department of a large city. One day this good-

looking officer in uniform came in and asked me where the drinking fountain was. I pointed it out to him. Next he

asked me if there were any cups. I let him borrow my coffee cup. He needed to take a couple of aspirin. I can still

see him throwing his head back to swallow those tablets. Then he said, "Whew! I really tied one on last night."

Right then I said to myself, “Oh, how sad. He’s drinking too much, probably because he’s lonely.” He was just what

I wanted—someone to take care of, someone who needed me. I thought, “I sure would like to try and make him

happy.” We married two months later and I spent the next four years trying. I used to cook these wonderful meals,

hoping to lure him home, but he’d go drinking and wouldn’t return until it was very late. Then we’d fight and I’d

cry. The next time he stayed out late I’d blame myself for getting upset the last time, and tell myself, *No wonder he*

doesn’t come home. It got worse and worse until finally I left him. All that was thirty-seven years ago, and just this

last year I realized he was an alcoholic. I’d always thought it was all my fault, that I just couldn’t make him happy.

Eleanor’s attraction to her husband

If you’ve been taught that men are no good by a mother who hates men, and on the other hand you loved your lost

father and find men attractive, you’re very likely to grow up fearing that the man you love will leave you. You might

therefore try to find a man who needs your help and understanding so that you can have the upper hand in the

relationship. This is what Eleanor did when she found herself drawn to the handsome policeman. Although this

formula is supposed to protect you from getting hurt and getting left by assuring that your man is dependent upon

you, the trouble with it is, you must begin with a man who has a problem. In other words, a man who is already on

his way to fitting the “men are no good” category. Eleanor wanted to guarantee that her man would not leave her (as

her father had, and as her mother said any man would), and his neediness seemed to provide that guarantee. But the

nature of his problem rendered him *more* likely to leave, not less.

Thus, the situation that was supposed to assure Eleanor that she would not be abandoned instead virtually

guaranteed that she would. Every night that he did not come home “proved” her mother had been right about men,

and finally she, like her mother, obtained a divorce from a “no-good” man.

Arleen: twenty-seven; from a violent family in which she tried to protect her mother

and siblings

We were in an acting company together, performing at a dinner theater. Ellis was seven years younger than I, and

not very physically attractive to me. I wasn’t particularly interested in him, but one day we did some shopping

together and went to dinner afterward. As we talked, all I could hear was that his life was just so messy. There were

all these things he wasn’t taking care of, and when he talked about them I got this terrific urge to get in there and set

it all straight. He mentioned to me that first evening that he was bisexual. Though that didn’t fit in with my value

system, I turned it into a joke and said I was, too—that when someone got sexual with me I said, “Bye.” Actually, I

was really afraid of men who came on too strong. My former husband had been abusive to me, and so had another

boyfriend. Ellis seemed safe to me. I was as sure that he couldn’t hurt me as I was that I could help him. Well, we

got heavily involved not long after that. In fact, we lived together for several months before I called it quits, and the

whole time I was tense and afraid. Here I thought I was doing him such a favor, and yet I was a wreck. My ego took

a beating, too. His attraction to men was always much stronger than his attraction to me. In fact, the night I was

hospitalized, deathly ill with viral pneumonia, he didn’t visit me because he was involved with a man. Three weeks

after I got out of the hospital I ended my relationship with him, but it took an enormous amount of support. My

sister, my mother, and my therapist all helped me through it. I became terribly, terribly depressed. I really didn’t

want to let go. I still felt he needed me and I was sure that with a little more effort on my part, we could make it

together.

When I was a kid, I had always felt that way, too, that any minute I’d figure out how to fix it all.

There were five of us kids. I was the oldest, and my mother leaned on me a lot. She had to keep our father happy,

which was impossible. He's still the meanest man I know. They finally divorced about ten years ago. I guess they

thought they were doing us a favor, waiting until we had left home, but it was miserable growing up in that family.

My father hit us all, even my mother, but he was the worst with my sister in terms of violence, and with my brother

in terms of verbal abuse. He crippled each of us in one way or another. All I ever felt was that there must be

something I could do to make everything better, but I never quite figured out what that would be. I tried talking to

my mother, but she was so passive. Then I'd stand up to my dad, but not very much because that was too dangerous.

I used to sort of coach my sister and brother on how not to get in Dad's way, not to talk back. We would even come

home from school and go through the house just to figure out what might upset him, in order to fix it before he got

home in the evening. We were all so scared and unhappy so much of the time.

Arleen's attraction to Ellis

Because she saw herself as stronger, more mature, and more practical than Ellis, Arleen hoped to have the upper

hand in her relationship with him and thereby avoid being hurt. This was an important factor in his appeal for her,

because she had a history of being physically and emotionally abused starting in childhood. Her fear and rage

toward her father made Ellis, in contrast, appear to be the perfect answer to her problems with men, because it

seemed unlikely that he would ever respond so strongly toward her as to become violent. Unfortunately, in the few

months they were together, she experienced as much hurt and heartache as she had with the heterosexual men she

had known.

The challenge of trying to literally and figuratively straighten out the life of a man who was basically gay was

commensurate with the level of struggle Arleen knew so well from childhood. The emotional pain inherent in this

relationship was familiar, too—always waiting for the other shoe to drop, to be hurt or shocked or offended by

someone who was supposedly on her side, who supposedly cared for her. Arleen's conviction that she could coerce

Ellis into becoming what she needed him to be made it difficult for her to finally let go.

Suzannah: twenty-six; divorced from two alcoholics; daughter of an emotionally

dependent mother

I was in San Francisco attending a three-day training seminar to prepare me to pass my state boards for my license

as a social worker. At the afternoon break of the second day, I spotted this very handsome man, and when he passed

by I flashed him my sunniest smile. Then I went off to sit outside and relax. He came up to me and asked me if I was

going up to the cafeteria. I said sure, I could go, and when we got there he said a little hesitantly, "Can I buy you

something?" I had the feeling he couldn't really afford it so I said, "Oh, no. That's okay." So I bought myself some

juice and we went back and talked for the rest of the break. We told each other where we were from and where we

worked and he said, "I'd like to have dinner with you tonight." We made arrangements to meet at Fisherman's

Wharf, and when I met him there that evening he looked troubled. He said he was trying to decide whether to be

romantic or practical, because he had only enough money with him to either take me on a cruise of the bay or to

dinner. Of course I jumped right in and said, "Let's go on the cruise and I'll take you to dinner." So we did, and I

felt strong and clever because I'd made it possible for him to do both things he wanted to do.

It was very beautiful out in the bay. The sun was setting, and we talked the whole time. He told me how afraid he

was to be close to someone, that he was in a relationship now that had gone on for years, but he knew it wasn't right

for him. He just stayed because he was so fond of the woman's six-year-old son and couldn't bear to think of the

boy growing up without a male figure in his life. He also hinted pretty broadly that he was having sexual difficulties

with this woman, because he wasn't all that attracted to her.

Well, all my wheels were turning. I was thinking, *This is a wonderful man who just hasn't met the right woman*

yet. Obviously he's tremendously compassionate and honest. It didn't matter that he was thirty-seven years old and

had probably had plenty of chances to develop a good relationship. That maybe, just maybe, something was wrong

with *him*.

Here he'd given me a virtual shopping list of his flaws: impotence, fear of intimacy, and financial problems. And

it didn't take much intelligence to figure out that he was pretty passive, too, from the way he operated. But I was too

enchanted with the idea that I could be the one to make a difference in his life to be warned off by what he was

saying.

We went to dinner and I paid, of course. He protested, saying how much it bothered him, and I just twinkled at

him that he could come visit me and take me out to dinner to pay me back. He thought that was a great idea, wanted

to know all about where I lived, where he could stay if he came down, what the job opportunities were in my town.

He had been a school-teacher fifteen years before, and after many job changes—each, he admitted, for less money

and less prestige—was now working in an outpatient counseling clinic for alcoholics. Well, that was perfect. I'd

been involved with alcoholics before and had been torn up in the process, but here was someone safe, someone who

couldn't possibly be alcoholic because he counseled them, right? He did mention that our waitress, an older woman

with a gravelly voice, reminded him of his mother, who was an alcoholic, and I knew how frequently children of

alcoholics develop the disease of alcoholism themselves. But he never drank the whole evening, just kept ordering

Perrier. I was practically purring, thinking, *This is the man for me*. Never mind all those job changes and the fact that

his career picture in general had been going downhill. That had to be due simply to bad luck. He seemed to have a

lot of bad luck and that made him more appealing. I felt sorry for him.

He spent quite a lot of time telling me how attracted he was to me, how comfortable it felt to be with me, how

well matched we were. I was feeling exactly the same way. We parted ways that night with him acting the perfect

gentleman and *my* kissing *him* goodnight very warmly. I felt so safe; here was a man who wasn't going to push at

me to be sexual, who just wanted to be with me because he enjoyed my company. I didn't take this as a sign that

perhaps he really did have sexual problems and was therefore trying to avoid the whole thing. I guess I was sure

that, given the chance, I could solve any little difficulties he had.

The seminar ended the next day, and afterward we talked about when he could visit me. He suggested he come

the week before his exams and stay at my apartment, but he wanted to just study while he was there. I had a few

days of vacation coming up and thought it would be great to take it during that time, so we could sight-see together.

No, his exams were too important. Pretty soon I was disregarding everything I would want to do, as I tried to make it

all perfect for him. I was also more and more afraid he wouldn't come down, even though having someone staying

in my apartment studying while I went to work every day didn't sound like a lot of fun. But I had this need to make

it right, and already felt guilty if he wasn't happy. And there was this terrific challenge to keep him interested. He

had started off so attracted to me that now, if he cooled off, it would feel like I had blown it, so I was standing on my

head trying to keep him involved.

Well, we parted ways with things still unsettled, even after I had come up with plan after plan, trying to solve all

the problems involved in his coming down. I felt depressed after we said goodbye and I didn't know why, just kind

of bad that I hadn't been able to fix it all and make him happy.

He called me the next afternoon, which made me feel wonderful. I felt redeemed.

The following night he called me at 10:30 and began to ask me what he should do about his present girlfriend. I

didn't have the answers on that one and told him so. My discomfort was really increasing now. I felt set up

somehow, and for once didn't follow an old pattern of mine to jump in and try to fix it. He began to yell at me over

the phone and then hung up on me. I was stunned. I began to think, *Maybe this is my fault; I wasn't helpful enough.*

And I had this terrific urge to call him back and apologize for making him so angry. But remember, I had been

involved with several alcoholics, and because of this I was going regularly to Al-Anon meetings; somehow that

program kept me from calling him and accepting all the blame. Well, in a few minutes he called back and

apologized for hanging up. Then he asked me all the same questions, which I still couldn't answer. He yelled some

more and hung up on me again. This time I realized he had been drinking, but I still had the same urge to call him

back and try to make everything all right. If I had taken responsibility for him on the phone that night, we might be

together right now, and I shudder to think what that would be like. A few days later I received this very civil note

saying he wasn't ready for another relationship at this time—no mention of the yelling or hanging up on me. That

was the end.

A year earlier, it would have been just the beginning. He was the kind of man I had always found irresistible:

handsome, charming, a little needy, not quite living up to his potential. In Al-Anon, when someone mentions how

she was attracted not to what a man was, but to his potential, we all have a great laugh together, because we've all

done it—been drawn to someone because we were sure he needed our help and encouragement to maximize his

gifts. I knew all about trying to help, to please, to do all the work and take all the responsibility for a relationship. I'd

done it as a child with my mother, and then with each of my husbands. My mother and I had never gotten along

well. She had lots of men in and out of her life, and when there was someone new she didn't want to be bothered

with having to take care of me, so I was trotted off to boarding school. But whenever one of them left her, then she

wanted me around to listen while she cried and complained. When we were together it was my job to comfort and

soothe her, but I could never do it well enough to take away her pain and she'd get angry at me for not really caring.

Then another man would come along and she'd forget all about me again. Of course I grew up making a career of

trying to help people. That was the only time I felt important or worthwhile as a child, and I had developed a need to

become better and better at it. So it was a great victory for me to finally overcome the urge to pursue a man who had

nothing to offer me other than the opportunity to help him.

Suzannah's attraction to the man in San Francisco

A career in social work was nearly as inevitable for Suzannah as her attraction to men who appeared to need her

comforting and encouragement. The first hint she had about this new man was that money was a problem for him.

When she took his cue and paid for her own juice, they each exchanged vital information: he let her know that he

was a little needy, and she responded by paying her own way and protecting his feelings. This theme, that he was

lacking and she had enough for both of them, was repeated when they met for their date and she paid for their

dinner. Problems with money, problems with sex, problems with intimacy—the very cues that should have been

warnings for Suzannah, given her history of involvement with needy, dependent men, were instead the signals that

attracted her, because they stirred her nurturing, caretaking behavior. It was very difficult to ignore what was for her

a powerful “hook”—a man who was not quite okay as he was but who, it seemed, with her help and attention, could

become something special. Suzannah was not able, at first, to ask, “What’s in this for me?” but because she was in

the process of recovery, she was finally able to assess what was happening in a realistic light. For the first time, she

paid attention to what *she* was getting out of the relationship, rather than totally focusing on how she could help this

man in need.

It is obvious that each of the women we have talked about found a man who presented her with the kind of challenge

she had already known, and who was therefore someone with whom she could feel comfortable and fully herself,

but it is important to understand that none of these women *recognized* what was attracting her. If that understanding

had been there, there would also have been a more conscious choice about whether to enter such a challenging

situation. Many times we believe we are attracted by qualities that appear to be the *opposite* of those our parents

possessed. Arleen, for instance, finding herself drawn to a bisexual man much younger than herself, of slight build,

and anything but physically aggressive toward her, consciously felt she would be safe with a man unlikely to repeat

her father's pattern of violence. But the less conscious struggle to change him into what he was not, to prevail in a

situation that from the beginning was obviously not going to meet her needs for love and security—that was the

inviting element in developing a relationship with him, and that was what made it so difficult for her to let go of him

and the challenge he represented.

Even more convoluted, but just as common, is what happened between Chloe, the art student, and her violent

misogynist. Every clue about who he was and how he felt was present in their first conversation, but her need to take

on the challenge he represented was so great that instead of seeing him as dangerously angry and aggressive, she

perceived him as a helpless victim, needing understanding. I would venture to guess that not every woman meeting

this man would see him thus. Most would give him and his attitudes wide berth, but Chloe distorted what she saw,

so strong was her drive to engage with this man and all he represented.

Once begun, why is it so difficult to stop these relationships, to let go of the partner who is dragging you through

all the painful steps of this destructive dance? A rule of thumb is, The more difficult it is to end a relationship that is

bad for you, the more elements of the childhood struggle it contains. When you are loving too much, it is because

you are trying to overcome the old fears, anger, frustration, and pain from childhood, and to quit is to surrender a

precious opportunity for finding relief and rectifying the ways you have been wronged.

While these are the unconscious psychological underpinnings that make explicable your drive to be with him in

spite of the pain, they do little justice to the intensity of your conscious experience.

It would be difficult to overstate the sheer emotional charge that this kind of relationship, once begun, carries for

the woman involved. When she tries to cut herself off from relating to the man she loves too much, she feels as

though thousands of volts of painful energy are rushing through her nerves and spilling out their severed ends. The

old emptiness surges and swirls around her, pulling her down into the place where her childhood terror of being

alone still lives, and she is sure she will drown in the pain.

This kind of charge—the sparks, the chemistry, the drive to be with that other person and to make it work—are

not present to the same degree in healthier, more satisfying relationships, because they do not embody all the

possibilities for settling old accounts and for prevailing over what was once overwhelming. It is this thrilling

possibility of righting old wrongs, winning lost love, and gaining withheld approval that, for women who love too

much, is the unconscious chemistry behind falling in love.

This is also why, when men come into our lives who are interested in our well-being and in our happiness and

fulfillment, and who present the genuine possibility of a healthy relationship, we usually are not interested. And

make no mistake: these kinds of men do come into our lives. Each of my clients who has loved too much has been

able to recall at least one, often several, men whom she has described wistfully as “really nice . . . so kind . . .

actually cared about me....” Then usually comes the ironic smile and the question, “Now why didn’t I stick with

him?” Often she is able, in the next breath, to answer her own query. “Somehow I could never get that excited about

him. I guess he was too nice, huh?”

A better answer would be that his actions and our reactions, his moves and our countermoves, didn’t mesh into a

perfect duet. Although being in his company might be pleasant, soothing, interesting, and affirming, it is difficult for

us to regard this kind of relationship as important and worth developing on a more serious level. Instead, such a man

has usually been either quickly dropped or ignored, or at best relegated to the “just a friend” category, because he

failed to arouse in us the heart pounding and stomach knotting we have come to call love.

Sometimes these men remain in the “friend” category for many years, meeting with us now and then for a drink

and drying our tears as we report the latest betrayal, breakup, or humiliation in our current relationship. This

sympathetic, understanding kind of man simply cannot offer us the drama, the pain, or the tension that feel so

exhilarating and right. This is because, for us, what should feel bad has come to feel good, and what should feel

good has come to feel foreign, suspect, and uncomfortable. We have learned, by long and close association, to prefer

the pain. A more healthy, loving man cannot play an important part in our life until we learn to let go of the need to

relive the old struggle again and again.

A woman with a healthier background has responses and thus relationships that are very different, because

struggling and suffering are not so familiar, not so much a part of her history, and therefore not so comfortable. If

being with a man causes her to become uncomfortable, hurt, worried, disappointed, angry, jealous, or otherwise

emotionally upset, she will experience that as disagreeable and aversive—something to be avoided rather than

pursued. On the other hand, she *will* pursue a relationship that offers her caring, comfort, and companionship

because it feels good to her. It would be safe to say that the attraction between two people who have the capability of

creating a rewarding relationship based on the exchange of healthy responses, while perhaps strong and exciting, is

never as *compelling* as the attraction between a woman who loves too much and the man with whom she can

“dance.”

6

Men Who Choose Women Who Love Too Much

She's the rock that I lean on,

She's the sunshine of my day,

And I don't care what you say about her

Lord, she took me in and made me everything I am today.

—“*She's My Rock*”

How does it work for the man involved? What is his experience of the chemistry that occurs in the first few

moments of meeting a woman who loves too much? And what happens to his feelings as the relationship continues,

especially if he begins to change and becomes either healthier or sicker?

Some of the men whose interviews follow have gained an unusual degree of self-knowledge, as well as a

considerable insight into the patterns of their relationships with the women who have been their partners. Several of

these men who are recovering from addictions have the benefit of years of therapeutic involvement in Alcoholics

Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, and are thus able to identify the appeal the co-alcoholic woman held for them

as they sank into or were already caught in the web of addiction. Others who have not had problems with addiction

have nevertheless had involvement with more traditional kinds of therapy, which helped them understand

themselves and their relationships better.

Though the details differ from story to story, always present is the appeal of the strong woman who somehow

promises to make up for what each man is lacking in himself or his life.

Tom: forty-eight; sober for twelve years; father died of alcoholism, as did an older

brother

I remember the night I met Elaine. It was at a dance at the country club. We were both in our early twenties, and

both with dates. My drinking was already a problem. I'd had one arrest for drunken driving at twenty and two years

later a serious car accident, which happened because I'd had too much to drink. But of course I didn't think alcohol

was doing me any harm at all. I was just a young man on the way up who knew how to have a good time.

Elaine was with an acquaintance of mine, who introduced us. She was very attractive and I was happy when we

did that “changing partners for one dance” kind of thing. Naturally, I’d been drinking that night, so I felt a little

bold; since I wanted to impress her while we were dancing, I tried some steps that were pretty fancy. I was trying so

hard to be suave that I literally ran into another couple and knocked the wind right out of the woman. I was really

embarrassed and couldn’t say much except to sort of mumble that I was sorry, but Elaine never missed a beat. She

took the woman by the arm, apologized to her and her partner, and walked them to their seats. She was so sweet that

the husband was probably glad the whole thing happened. Then she came back, very concerned about me, too.

Another woman might have been angry and never spoken to me again. Well, I wasn’t about to let her get away, after

that.

Her father and I always got along great, until he died. Of course, he was an alcoholic, too. And my mother loved

Elaine. She kept telling her that I needed someone like her to look after me.

For a long time Elaine kept covering up for me the way she had that first night. When she finally got help for

herself and stopped making it easy for me to continue drinking, I told her she didn’t love me anymore and ran off

with my twenty-two-year-old secretary. After that I went downhill fast. It was six months later that I attended my

first A.A. meeting, and I've been sober ever since.

Elaine and I got back together after I'd been sober a year. It was real hard, but there was still a great deal of love

there. We're not the same people who married twenty years ago, but we both like ourselves and each other better

than we did then, and we work on being honest with each other every day.

Tom's attraction to Elaine

What happened between Tom and Elaine is typical of what happens between an alcoholic and a co-alcoholic on first

meeting. He gets in trouble and she, rather than being offended, figures out how to help him, how to cover things

over and make him and everyone else comfortable. She provides a feeling of safety, which for him has powerful

appeal since his life is becoming unmanageable.

When Elaine joined Al-Anon and learned to stop actually helping Tom stay sick by covering up for him, he did

what many addicts do when their partners begin to recover. He retaliated as dramatically as he could, and since for

every male alcoholic there are plenty of female co-alcoholics looking for someone to save, he quickly found Elaine's

replacement, another woman who was willing to continue the kind of rescuing and enabling that Elaine now refused

to do for him. He also got so much sicker that his choices narrowed down to two: to begin to recover or to die. Only

when his alternatives were that bleak did he become willing to change.

The relationship is currently intact, owing to both these people's involvement in the Anonymous programs, A.A.

for Tom, Al-Anon for Elaine. There they are learning, for the first time in their lives, to relate to each other in a

healthy, nonmanipulative way.

Charles: sixty-five; retired civil engineer with two children; divorced, remarried,

and now widowed

Helen has been dead for two years now, and I'm finally beginning to sort it all out. I never thought I'd see a

therapist, not at my age. But after her death I was so angry it scared me. I couldn't stop feeling I wanted to hurt her. I

had dreams about hitting her and I'd wake up yelling at her. I thought I was going crazy. Finally I got the nerve to

tell my doctor. He's as old and conservative as I am, so when he told me I'd better get some counseling I swallowed

my pride and did it. I contacted the Hospice people in town and they put me in touch with a therapist who

specializes in helping people get through grief. Well, we worked on my grief and it still kept coming up as anger, so

finally I started accepting that I was mad as hell and began with the help of the therapist to look at why.

Helen was my second wife. My first wife, Janet, still lives here in town with her new husband. I guess *new* is a

funny word to use. All this happened twenty-five years ago. I met Helen when I was a civil engineer for the county.

She was a secretary in the planning department and I used to see her at work sometimes and maybe once or twice a

week at lunchtime in a little coffee shop downtown. She was a very pretty woman, always beautifully dressed, and a

little shy but friendly, too. I could tell she liked me just by the way she looked at me and smiled. I guess I was a little

flattered that she noticed me. I knew she was divorced with two kids, and I felt kind of sorry for her, having to raise

them all alone. Anyway, one day I offered to buy her coffee and we had a nice little talk. I made it clear I was

married, but I guess I griped a little bit too much about some of the frustrations of married life. I still don't know

how she managed to convey the message that day that I was too wonderful a man to ever be unhappy, but I left that

coffee shop feeling ten feet tall and wanting to see her again, wanting to feel the way she had made me feel:

appreciated. Maybe it was because she didn't have a man in her life and she missed that, but I sure felt big and

strong and special after our little talk.

Still, I had no intention of getting involved. I'd never done anything like that before. I'd come out of the army

after the war and settled down with the wife I'd left waiting for me. Janet and I weren't the happiest couple, but we

weren't the unhappiest either. I never thought I'd run around on her.

Helen had been married twice before and had suffered a lot in each marriage. Both men had walked out on her

and she'd had a child by each. Now she was raising her children alone, without any support.

The worst thing we could have done was get involved with each other. I felt so sorry for her, but I knew that I had

nothing to offer her. In those days you couldn't get a divorce just because you wanted one, and I certainly didn't

make enough money to lose everything I had and then start over with another family to support in addition to my

own. Besides, I really didn't want a divorce. I wasn't crazy about my wife anymore, but I loved my kids and I liked

what we all had together. All that began to change, though, as Helen and I continued to see each other. Neither of us

could quit. Helen was lonely and said she'd rather have a little bit of me than nothing, and I knew she meant it. Once

I had begun with Helen, there was no way out without hurting someone terribly. Pretty soon I felt like the worst kind

of heel. Both these women were counting on me and I was letting both of them down. Helen was mad about me.

She'd do anything to see me. When I tried to break it off I'd see her at work and her sweet, sad face would just break

my heart. Well, after a year or so Janet found out about us and told me to stop seeing Helen or leave. I tried to stop

but couldn't stick to it. Besides, everything between Janet and me was so different now. There seemed to be less

reason than ever to let go of Helen.

It's a long story. Helen and I had a nine-year affair, while my wife tried very hard first to keep me in the marriage,

and then to punish me for leaving her. Helen and I lived together on and off several times during those years until

Janet finally got tired and agreed to a divorce.

I still hate to think about what it did to all of us. In those days, people did not just live together. I think I really lost

all my pride during those years. I was ashamed for myself, for my kids, for Helen and her kids, even for Janet, who

had never done anything to deserve all this.

Finally, after Janet quit fighting it and the divorce was final, Helen and I got married. But something was different

between us as soon as the divorce was in the works. All those years, Helen had been warm and loving and seductive

—very seductive. Of course I loved it. All that loving was what kept me with her in spite of the pain to my kids, my

wife, her, and her kids—all of us. She made me feel like the most desirable man in the world. Of course, we had

fought before we got married, because the tension was terrible, but our fights always ended with lovemaking and I

felt more wanted and needed and cared for than I ever had in my life.
Somehow, what Helen and I had together

seemed so special, so right, that the price we were paying almost seemed worth it.

But when we finally could be together and begin to hold our heads up,
Helen cooled off. She still went to work

looking great, but at home she was careless about her appearance. I didn't mind but I did notice. And sex slowed

way down. She wasn't interested anymore. I tried not to pressure her, but it was frustrating to me. I was finally

feeling less guilty and more ready to really enjoy being with her both at home and out in the world, and she was

pulling away.

Within two years we had separate bedrooms. And it went on like that, cool and distant, until she died. I never

really thought of leaving. I'd paid such a price to be with her, how could I?

When I look back I realize that Helen suffered probably more than I did through all those years of our affair. She

never really knew whether I'd leave Janet or leave her. She used to cry a lot and a couple of times she threatened

suicide. She hated being "the other woman." But as awful as those years before our marriage were, they were more

loving and caring and exciting and special than anything afterward.

I felt like such a failure after we married, that somehow I couldn't make her happy now that most of our problems

were behind us.

I came to understand a lot about myself in therapy but I believe I also became willing to look at some things about

Helen I hadn't wanted to face. She functioned better under all the strain and pressure and secretiveness of our affair

than she did when things were more normal. That's why the love between us died as soon as the affair was over and

the marriage began.

When I could look at all this honestly I began to get over the terrible anger I'd felt toward her since her death. I

was angry because being with Helen had cost me so much: my marriage, in many ways my children's love, and the

respect of my friends. I guess I felt like I'd been cheated.

Charles's attraction to Helen

Beautiful and alluring when they first met, Helen soon provided Charles with sexual bliss, blind devotion, and love

bordering on reverence. His strong attraction to her in spite of a stable, fairly satisfying marriage hardly requires an

explanation or justification. Quite simply, Helen made it her life's work from the beginning and throughout all the

long years of their affair to deepen Charles's love for her and to make bearable and even worthwhile his long

struggle to be free of his marriage.

What does merit explanation is Helen's sudden and patent disinterest in the man for whom she had waited and

suffered so long, once he was finally able to freely share a life with her. Why did she love him to distraction while

he was married and quickly tire of him when he was not?

Because Helen wanted only what she couldn't really have. To tolerate sustained interaction with a man personally

and sexually, she needed the guarantee of distance and unattainability that Charles's marriage supplied. Only under

those conditions was she able to give herself to him. She could not comfortably endure a genuine partnership that

could, freed of the wracking pressures of his marriage, develop and deepen on a basis other than their mutual

struggle against the world. Helen needed the excitement, tension, and emotional pain of loving an unavailable man

in order to relate at all. She had virtually no capacity for intimacy, or even much tenderness, once she was no longer

embroiled in the struggle to win Charles. Having been won, he was virtually discarded.

Yet through those long years of waiting for him, she gave every appearance of being a woman who loved too

much. She genuinely suffered, pined, wept, and wailed for the man she loved but could not truly have. She

experienced him as the center of her being, the most important force in her world—until she had him. Then the

reality of him as a partner, with the bittersweet romance of their illicit affair removed, failed to rouse her to the

thrills of passion she'd enjoyed for nine years with this same man.

Often it is observed that when two people who have been involved for years finally make a commitment to marry

each other, something goes out of the relationship; the excitement is lost, and they fall out of love. That this happens

is not necessarily because they have stopped trying to please each other. It may be because one or the other or both

of them have overstepped their capacity for intimacy by making that very commitment. An open-ended relationship

provides the promise of safety from deeper intimacy. With commitment there is often emotional withdrawal in an

effort toward self-protection.

This is precisely what happened between Helen and Charles. Charles, for his part, ignored whatever signs there

were of Helen's lack of emotional depth because of the flattery he felt from her attention. Far from being a passive

victim of her machinations and manipulations, Charles actively refused to acknowledge the part of Helen's character

that didn't fit with the view of himself—a view she had fostered and he wanted to believe—that he was enormously

lovable and sexually irresistible. He lived in a carefully constructed fantasy world with Helen for many years,

unwilling to puncture the illusion his ego had grown to cherish. Much of his anger after Helen's death was at

himself, as he belatedly admitted his own denial and the role he had played in creating and perpetuating the fantasy

of an all-consuming love, which finally resulted in the most sterile of marriages.

Russell: thirty-two; licensed social worker (having received a pardon from the

governor) who designs community programs for youthful offenders

The kids I work with are always impressed with that tattoo of my name on my left forearm. It says a lot about the

way I used to live. I got it done when I was seventeen because I was sure that someday I was going to be lying on

the ground dead, and nobody would know who I was. I thought I was a helluva bad guy.

I lived with my mother till I was seven. Then she remarried and her new husband and I didn't get along. I ran

away a lot and in those days they locked you up for that. First it was juvenile hall, then foster homes and more trips

to juvenile hall. Pretty soon it was Boys' Camp and then Y.A., the Youth Authority. As I got older I was in and out

of the local jails, and finally prison. By the time I was twenty-five I had been in every kind of correctional facility

the state of California had to offer, from forest camp to maximum security.

Needless to say, I spent a lot more time locked up than I did on the outside during those years. But I still managed

to meet Monica. One night in San Jose, a buddy I knew from Y.A. and I were cruising around in this "borrowed"

car. We pulled into a hamburger drive-in and parked next to these two girls. We got to talking and joking with them,

and pretty soon we were sitting in the back seat of their car.

Well, my buddy was a real ladies' man. He had the coolest line, so whenever there were girls around I let him do

all the talking. He could always get a couple of girls interested, but he also got first pick because he was so slick and

did all the work, and I'd have second choice. I had no complaints that night, because he paired off with this sexy

little blonde who was driving and I ended up with Monica. She was fifteen, really pretty, all soft and wide-eyed and

interested. She had this really sweet way, right from the beginning, of *caring* so much.

Now, when you've done time you learn that there are some women who'll think you're a creep and have nothing

to do with you. But there are others who get turned on by the whole idea. It fascinates them. They see you as big and

bad and they get real seductive, trying to tame you. Or they think you've been hurt and they feel sorry for you and

want to help you. Monica was definitely in the category of wanting to help. She was a real nice girl, too. No heavy

stuff right away. While my buddy was making it with her girlfriend, Monica and I took a walk in the moonlight and

talked. She wanted to know everything about me. I cleaned up my story quite a bit so I wouldn't scare her off, and I

told her a lot of the sad things, like how much my stepfather hated me and some of the crummy foster homes I'd

been in where they gave me hand-me-downs and spent the money meant for me on their own kids. While I was

talking she squeezed my hand real hard and patted it and even got tears in her big brown eyes. Man, by the time we

said goodbye that night I was in love. My buddy wanted to tell me every juicy detail of his big score with the blonde

and I didn't even want to listen. Monica had given me her address and phone number and I was going to call her the

next day for sure, but as we were driving out of the city we got stopped by the cops because the car was hot. All I

could think about was Monica. I was sure that was the end of it because I'd told her how hard I was trying to clean

up my act and go straight.

When I was back in Y.A. I decided to take a chance and write her. I told her I was doing time again, but for

something I didn't do—that the cops had arrested me because I had a record and they didn't like me. Monica wrote

right back and kept on writing me just about every day for the next two years. All we ever wrote each other about

was how much we were in love, how much we missed each other, and what we would do together when I got out.

Her mother wouldn't let her meet me in Stockton when I was released, so I took a bus back to San Jose. I was so

excited about seeing her again, but really scared about it, too. I guess I was afraid she wouldn't want me after all. So

instead of going to see her right away I looked up some old buddies and one thing led to another. We started raising

hell, and by the time they finally drove me to Monica's house, four days had gone by. I was pretty wrecked. I'd had

to get loaded just to have the courage to come see her, I was so afraid she'd tell me to get lost.

Her mother was at work, thank God, when the guys dumped me on her sidewalk. Monica came out smiling, so

glad to see me even though she hadn't heard from me since I'd hit town. I remember that we went for another of our

great walks that day as soon as I wasn't so high. I didn't have any money to take her anywhere and no car either, but

she didn't seem to mind then or ever.

For a long time I could do no wrong in Monica's eyes. She made excuses for everything I did and didn't do. I was

in and out of jail and then prison for years, and she still married me and stuck by me. Her own dad had deserted the

family when she was just a little kid. Her mother was real bitter about that, and she didn't like me too well, either. In

fact, that's why Monica and I got married. Once when I'd been busted for bad checks and forgery her mom wouldn't

let Monica see me when I was out on bail, so we ran off together and got married. Monica was eighteen then. We

lived in a hotel for a little while until my trial. She had a job as a waitress but she quit so she could come to court

every day during the trial. Then, of course, I went to prison, and Monica went back home to her mom. They fought

so much that she left and moved to the town nearest the prison and worked as a waitress again. It was a college town

and I always hoped she'd go back to school; she really liked school and she was so bright. But she said she didn't

want to, she just wanted to wait for me. We'd write and she'd come visit as often as they'd let her. She talked to the

prison chaplain about me a lot and kept asking him to talk to me and help me, until I finally asked her not to do that

anymore. I hated talking to the guy. I just couldn't relate.

Even though she visited she kept on writing, too, and she'd send all these books and articles about improving

yourself. She told me constantly that she was praying for me to change. I wanted to stay out of prison, but I'd been

doing time for so long it was all I knew how to do.

Well, finally something clicked inside me and I got involved in a program to help me make it out there in the

world. I went to school while I was on the inside and learned a trade, plus I finished high school and started on my

college education. When I got out, I somehow stayed out of trouble and continued with my education until I had a

master's degree in social work. But along the way, I lost my wife. At first when we were really struggling to make it

we got along okay, but as things got easier and we began to achieve what we'd always hoped for, Monica got

angrier and snappier than I'd ever seen her in all those years through all those troubles. She left me just when we

should have been happiest. I don't even know where she is now. Her mother won't tell me and I finally decided that

it wasn't my business to look for her if she didn't want to be with me. Sometimes I think it was lot easier for Monica

to love an idea of me than to love me in person. We were so in love when we were barely ever together, when all we

had were letters and visits and the dream of what we'd have someday. When I started making what we'd wished for

a reality, we fell apart. The more middle-class we became, the less she liked it. I guess she couldn't feel sorry for me

anymore.

Russell's attraction to Monica

Nothing in Russell's background prepared him to be emotionally or even physically present to another person in a

loving, committed relationship. For most of his life he had actively been seeking a feeling of strength and safety by

either running away or engaging in dangerous escapades. Through these highly distracting, tension-generating

activities, he sought to avoid his own despair. He used involvement in danger to avoid feeling pain and helplessness

at having been emotionally abandoned by his mother.

When he met Monica he was enchanted by her softly appealing looks and her tender attitude toward him. Rather

than rejecting him for being “bad,” she responded to his problems with sincere interest and deep compassion. She

immediately communicated that she was willing to be there for him, and it wasn’t long before he tested her staying

power. When he disappeared, Monica responded by patiently waiting. She seemed to have enough love, stability,

and endurance to handle whatever Russell might do. Though it appears that Monica had a great measure of tolerance

for Russell and his behavior, actually the exact opposite was true. What neither of these young people consciously

realized was that she could be there for him only as long as he was not there for her. As long as he was separated

from her, Russell found in Monica the perfect partner, the ideal prisoner’s wife. She willingly spent her life waiting

and hoping that he would change and that then they could be together. Prison wives like Monica present perhaps the

ultimate example of women who love too much. Because they are incapable of any degree of intimacy with a man,

they choose instead to live with a fantasy, a dream of how much they will love and be loved someday when their

partner changes and becomes available to them. But they can be intimate only in fantasy.

When Russell accomplished the nearly impossible and began to go straight and stay out of jail, Monica drifted

away. Having him present in her life demanded a threatening level of intimacy; it made her far more uncomfortable

than his absence ever had. Nor could day-to-day reality with Russell ever compete with the idealized vision of

mutual love she had entertained. There is a saying among convicts that they all have their Cadillacs parked at the

curb waiting for them, meaning they entertain an overly idealized version of what life will be like for them when

they are back on the streets. In the imagination of prisoners' wives like Monica, what is probably parked at the curb

is not the Cadillac symbolizing money and power, but a coach drawn by six white horses, representing magically

romantic love. How these women will love and be loved—that is their dream. Along with their convict husbands,

they usually find it easier to live with the dream than to struggle to try to make it come true in the real world.

What is important to understand is that it *appeared* that Russell was unable to love with much depth, while

Monica, with all her patience and compassion, seemed to be very good at it. In fact, they were both equally deficient

in the ability to love intimately. That is why they became partners when they couldn't be together, and why when

they could be together their relationship had to end. It is instructive to note that Russell does not have a new partner

in his life at this time. He, too, is still struggling with intimacy.

Tyler: forty-two; business executive; divorced, no children

I used to make a joke when we were still together and tell people that when I first saw Nancy my heart was

pounding so hard that I couldn't catch my breath. It was true: she was a nurse who worked for the firm where I'm

employed, and I was in her office on a treadmill, having my respiratory system checked—that's what all the heart

pounding and heavy breathing was about. I had been sent in by my superior because I gained so much weight and

also because I'd been having some pains in my chest. Actually, I was in terrible shape. My wife had left me a year

and a half before for another man, and while I know that starts a lot of guys running to the bars at night, I just stayed

home and watched TV and ate.

I had always liked to eat. My wife and I had played a lot of tennis and I guess that had taken care of the calories

when we were together, but with her gone, playing tennis depressed me. Hell, everything depressed me. That day in

Nancy's office I learned I'd gained sixty-five pounds in eighteen months. I'd never even bothered to weigh myself,

though I'd gone through several sizes of clothes. I just didn't care.

Nancy was all business at first, telling me how serious the weight gain was and what I'd have to do to get rid of it,

but I was feeling like an old man and I really didn't want to make the effort to change.

I guess I just felt sorry for myself. Even my ex, when she'd see me, would scold me and say, "How can you let

yourself go like this?" I half hoped she'd come back to save me, but she didn't.

Nancy asked me if there was any precipitating event tied in with my weight gain. When I told her about the

divorce she stopped being quite so professional and patted my hand sympathetically. I remember I felt a little thrill

when she did that, and it was special because I hadn't felt much of anything for anybody for a very long time. She

advised a diet and gave me lots of pamphlets and charts and told me to come back once every two weeks so she

could see how I was doing. I couldn't wait to get back there. The two weeks went by and I hadn't followed the diet

or lost any weight, but I sure had gained her sympathy. She and I spent my entire second appointment talking about

how the divorce had affected me. She listened and then urged me to do all the things everybody tells you to do: go to

classes, join a health club, take a trip with a group, develop new interests. I agreed to everything, did nothing, and

waited two more weeks to see her again. It was at this checkup that I asked her out. I knew I was fat and miserable

looking, and I really don't know where I got the nerve, but I did, and she accepted. When I picked her up Saturday

night she had more pamphlets, along with journal articles on diet, the heart, exercise, and grieving. I hadn't had this

much attention in a long time.

We started going out and pretty soon we were getting serious about each other. I thought Nancy was going to

make all the pain go away for me. She sure tried, I'll say that. I even moved out of my apartment and into hers. She

made a big deal of cooking low-cholesterol meals and watching everything I ate. She even made me lunches to take

to work. Although I wasn't eating anything close to what I had been consuming all those nights alone in front of the

TV, I wasn't losing, either. I just stayed the same, no fatter, no thinner. I tell you, Nancy was working a lot harder

than I was to get me to lose that weight. We both sort of acted like it was her project, her responsibility to make me

better.

Actually, I think I have a metabolism that requires strenuous exercise in order for me to burn up calories

efficiently, and I wasn't getting much exercise at all. Nancy played golf and I would play with her a bit, but it just

wasn't my game.

After we'd been together about eight months, I made a business trip back to Evanston, my hometown. Sure

enough, after being there two days I ran into a couple of friends from high school. I hadn't wanted to see anyone,

looking the way I did, but these guys were old friends and we had a lot to talk about. They were surprised to hear

about my divorce. My wife was a hometown girl, too. Anyway, they talked me into playing a set of tennis. They

both played, and they knew it was my game from high school. I didn't think I could last through a single game and

told them so, but they insisted.

It felt so good to be playing again. Even though the extra pounds really slowed me down, and I lost every game I

played. I told them I'd be back next year to whip them both.

When I got home Nancy told me she'd gone to this great seminar on nutrition and she wanted me to try out all this

new stuff she'd learned. I told her no, that I was going to do it my own way for a while.

Now, Nancy and I had never fought. Sure, she fussed over me a lot and was constantly on me to take better care

of myself, but it wasn't until I started playing tennis again that she and I began to squabble. I played at noon so it

didn't take away from the time we spent together, but she and I were never the same.

Nancy is an attractive gal, about eight years younger than I am and once I began to shape up I thought we'd get

along better than ever because she'd be proud of me. God knows, I felt better about myself. But it sure didn't work

that way. She complained that I just wasn't the same anymore and finally asked me to move out. By that time I

weighed only seven pounds more than I had before the divorce. It was really hard for me to leave her. I'd hoped we

would eventually get married. But once I was thinner, she was right—it just wasn't the same between us anymore.

Tyler's attraction to Nancy

Tyler was a man with rather pronounced dependency needs, which were exaggerated by the crisis of the divorce. His

almost deliberate deterioration, calculated to arouse his wife's pity and solicitude, failed with her but nevertheless

attracted a woman who loved too much, who made another's well-being the core of her purpose in life. His

helplessness and pain and her eagerness to help were the basis for their mutual attraction.

Tyler was still smarting from his wife's rejection, as well as deeply grieving for the loss of her and the end of their

marriage. In this unhappy state common to all those struggling through the throes of separation, he was attracted not

so much to Nancy as a person as to her role of nurse and healer, and to the surcease from suffering that she seemed

to offer.

Much in the same way he had used great quantities of food to fill his emptiness and smother his loss, he now used

Nancy's hovering solicitude to provide a sense of emotional security and bolster his damaged self-worth. But

Tyler's need for Nancy's total attention was temporary, a passing phase in his healing process. As time worked its

magic, replacing self-obsession and self-pity with healthier self-assertion, Nancy's overprotection, once comforting,

now became cloying. Unlike Tyler's temporarily exaggerated dependency, her need to be needed was not a passing

phase, but rather a core trait in her personality and almost her sole framework for relating to another person. She was

“nurse” both at work and at home. Though Tyler would still be a fairly dependent partner even after recovery from

the shock of divorce, the depth of his need to be taken care of could not match the depth of her need to manage and

control another’s life. His health, for which she had seemed to work tirelessly, was actually the death knell for their

relationship.

Bart: thirty-six; former executive; alcoholic since the age of fourteen. Sober two

years

I’d been divorced and out doing the singles scene for about a year when I met Rita. She was this long-legged, dark-

eyed, hippie-looking girl, and at first we got stoned a lot together. I had lots of money still, and we really had a great

time for a while. But you know, Rita was never really a hippie. She was too responsible to let go much. She could

smoke a little dope with me, but somehow her proper Bostonian background would never totally disappear. Even her

apartment was neat all the time. I had this sense of being safe with her, as if she wouldn’t let me fall too far.

The first night we went out we had a great dinner and then came back to her apartment. I got really drunk, and I

guess I passed out. Anyway, I woke up on her couch all covered up with this nice, soft quilt, and my head was on a

pillow that was scented, and I just felt as if I'd come home—a safe harbor, you know? Rita knew all about taking

care of alcoholics. Her father, a banker, had died from his disease. Anyway, I moved in with her a few weeks after

that, and came on like the hot shot wheeler-dealer for the next couple of years, for as long as I could get away with

it, until I lost everything.

She had quit doing any dope at all after about the first six months we were together. I guess she figured she'd

better keep on top of things because I was so out of it. In the middle of all this we got married. Then I really got

scared. Now I had another responsibility, and I hadn't done so well with responsibility. Besides, right about the time

we got married, I was losing everything financially. I just couldn't hold it together anymore in the shape I was in,

drinking all day long. Rita didn't know it was that bad, because I'd tell her I was going to a business meeting in the

morning and instead I'd drive out in my Mercedes and park by the beach and drink. Finally, when the bottom really

fell out of the business and I owed everybody in town, I didn't know what to do.

I took off on a long trip, intending to kill myself in my car and make it look like an accident. But she came after

me, found me in this sleazy hotel, and took me home. All the money was gone but she still got me into an

alcoholism treatment hospital. It's funny, but I wasn't grateful. I was angry, confused, very scared—and totally

turned off to her sexually for about the first year of sobriety. I still don't know if we'll make it, but it's getting a little

better as time goes by.

Bart's attraction to Rita

When on their first date Bart got drunk and passed out, Rita, by making sure that he didn't suffer, seemed to promise

him a respite from his headlong rush toward self-destruction. For a while it looked as though she might be able to

protect him from the ravages of his own addiction, to subtly and sweetly save him. This seemingly protective

attitude actually served to lengthen the time that her partner could practice his addiction and not feel the

consequences; by shielding and comforting him, she helped him stay sick longer. An addict who is practicing his

disease isn't looking for someone to help him get well, he's looking for someone with whom he can stay sick,

safely. Rita was perfect for a while, until Bart got so sick even she couldn't undo what he was doing to himself.

When she tracked him down and entered him into a hospital program for alcoholics, Bart began to give up alcohol

and recover. Rita, however, had come between him and his drug. She was no longer performing her usual role of

comforting him and making everything all right, and he resented her for that apparent betrayal and also for

appearing to be so strong when he felt so weak and helpless.

No matter how badly we're botching the job, each of us needs to feel that we are in charge of our own life. When

someone helps us, we often resent that person's implied power and superiority. Moreover, a man often needs to feel

stronger than his female partner in order to feel sexually attracted to her. In this case, the help Rita gave Bart by

getting him into a hospital only made it clear how very sick he was, and her deeply caring gesture thus undermined,

at least for a while, his sexual attraction to her.

Besides this emotional aspect, there may also be an important physiological factor operating here that should be

taken into consideration. When a man has been using alcohol and other drugs the way Bart did, and then stops, it

sometimes takes a year or more for his body chemistry to right itself and for him to respond sexually in a normal

fashion, without the presence of a drug in his system. During this period of physical adjustment the couple may have

considerable difficulty understanding and accepting his lack of interest and/or inability to perform sexually.

The opposite can also occur. An unusually strong sex drive may develop in the newly clean and sober addict,

perhaps due to hormonal disequilibrium. Or, again, the reason may be more psychological. As one young man,

abstinent from alcohol and other drugs for a few weeks put it, "Sex is the only way I can get high now." Sex may

thus be substituted for the use of a drug to relieve the anxiety that is typical in early sobriety.

Recovery from addiction and co-addiction is an extremely complex and delicate process for a couple. Bart and

Rita might survive that transition, even though they originally came together because their diseases of alcoholism

and co-alcoholism called to each other. But to make it as a couple in the absence of active addiction, they must walk

separate paths for a while, each focusing on his or her own recovery. They must each look within and embrace the

self they tried so hard, through loving each other, dancing with each other, to avoid.

Greg: thirty-eight; clean and sober for fourteen years in Narcotics Anonymous; now

married with two children, and working as a counselor to young drug abusers

We met in the park one day. She was reading an underground newspaper and I was just Sort of spacing out. It was a

Saturday in summer, around noon, really hot and quiet.

I was twenty-two and had dropped out of college my first year, but I kept making noises that I was going to go

back. That was so my parents would keep on sending me money. They couldn't let go of their dream that I would

finish school and enter a profession, so they bailed me out for a long time.

Alana was pretty fat, about forty or fifty pounds overweight, which meant she wasn't a threat to me. Because she

wasn't perfect, if she rejected me it wouldn't count. I started a conversation with her about what she was reading,

and it was easy, right from the beginning. She laughed a lot, which made me feel as if I was this charming,

entertaining guy. She told me about Mississippi and Alabama, and marching with Martin Luther King, and what it

had been like, working with all these people who were trying to make a difference.

I'd never been committed to anything except having a good time. Getting high and getting by was my motto, and

I was much better at getting high than at getting by. Alana was so intense. She said she loved being back in

California, but that sometimes she felt she didn't have the right to be so comfortable when other people in this

country were suffering.

We sat in the park together for two or three hours that day, just kind of drifting along, telling each other more and

more about who we were. After a while we went back to the house I shared to get stoned, but when we got there she

was hungry. She started eating and cleaning the kitchen, while I was getting loaded in the living room. There was

music on and I remember she came out with this jar of peanut butter, these crackers, and a knife, and sat down real

close to me. We just laughed and laughed. I think in that moment we both let ourselves be seen as addicts, more

clearly than we ever did after that day. There were no excuses then, just the behaviors. And we were both doing

exactly what we wanted to do, plus we'd found someone who wouldn't give us a hard time about it. Without saying

a word we knew it was going to work for us to be together.

We had a lot of good times after that, but I don't think there was ever another time when it was all so easy, when

both of us were so free of defenses. Addicts are pretty defensive people.

I remember we used to fight a lot about whether I could make love to her without being stoned. She was sure she

was repulsive because she was fat. When I got loaded before we made love she thought I had to, in order to stand it.

Actually, I had to be stoned in order to make love to anybody. We both had pretty low self-esteem. It was easy for

me to hide behind her addiction because her weight *showed* that there was a problem. My lack of motivation and the

fact that my life was going nowhere were less obvious than those fifty pounds she was carrying around. So there

we'd be, fighting over whether I could really love her even though she was heavy. She'd get me to say that it was

who she was inside that counted, not how she looked, and then there would be peace for a while.

She said she ate because she was so unhappy. I said I got loaded because I couldn't make her happy. In this really

sick way we were perfect foils for each other. We each had an excuse for what we were doing.

Most of the time we pretended there were no real problems, though. After all, lots of people are fat, and lots of

people get loaded. So we'd just ignore the whole thing.

Then I got arrested for possession of dangerous drugs. I spent ten days in jail and my parents got me a hotshot

attorney who got me into counseling as an alternative to more jail time. Alana moved out while I was locked up for

those ten days. I was so angry. I felt she'd abandoned me. Actually, we were fighting more and more. When I look

back now I realize I was becoming pretty hard to live with.

The paranoia that develops in people who do drugs for any length of time had been really beginning to affect me.

Also, I was either loaded or wanting to get loaded almost all of the time. Alana had been taking all of it personally,

thinking that if she were only different I would want to be more present with her, not stoned every minute. She

thought I was avoiding her. Hell, I was avoiding myself!

Anyway, she disappeared for about ten months, on another march, I think. The counselor I saw insisted that I go

to Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Since it was either that or jail, I went. I saw some people there I had known from

the street and after a while it began to dawn on me that I just might have a problem with drugs. These people were

getting on with life and I was still getting stoned every day, all day. So I stopped bullshitting my way through

meetings and I asked one guy I thought a lot of if he'd help me. He became my sponsor in N.A., and I'd call him

twice a day, morning and night. It meant changing everything I did—friends, parties, everything-but I did it. The

counseling helped, too, because that counselor knew everything I was going to go through before I did, and he'd

warn me. Anyway, it worked, and I was able to stay away from drugs and alcohol.

Alana came back when I'd been clean and sober in N.A. for four months, and right away it was the same old

thing. We had this game we played together. The counselor called it "colluding." It was our way of using each other

to feel good or bad about ourselves and, of course, to practice our addictions. I knew I'd get loaded if I got into all

that behavior with her. Now we're not even friends anymore. It just didn't work if we couldn't be sick together.

Greg's attraction to Alana

Greg and Alana shared a powerful bond right from the beginning. They each had an addiction that was ruling their

lives, and from the first day they met they focused on each other's addiction to diminish, in comparison, the

importance and power of their own. Then, throughout their relationship, they subtly and not-so-subtly exchanged

permission with each other to stay sick, even while protesting each other's condition. This is an extremely common

pattern with addictive couples, whether they are addicted to the same substance or to different ones. They use each

other's behavior and problems to avoid facing the seriousness of their own deterioration-and the greater the

deterioration the more this partner is needed to provide a distraction, to be even sicker, even more obsessed, even

less in control.

Along with this dynamic, Alana appeared to Greg as compassionate, willing to suffer for something she believed

in. This always has a magnetic allure for an addictive person, because a willingness to suffer is a prerequisite for a

relationship with an addict. It guarantees that the addict won't be abandoned when things inevitably start to go bad.

After long months of bitter quarreling it was still only when Greg was gone, doing time in jail, that Alana found the

strength to leave him, even temporarily. She inevitably returned, ready to begin again where they had left off, as two

practicing addicts.

Greg and Alana knew only how to be sick together. With Alana's own addiction to food still out of control she

could feel strong and healthy only if Greg were constantly loaded, just as he could feel his drug use was coolly self-

controlled compared to her binges with food and extreme overweight. Greg's recovery made her lack of recovery

too obvious for them to be comfortable together any longer. She would have needed to sabotage his sobriety in order

for them to return to a workable status quo.

Erik: forty-two; divorced and remarried

I'd been divorced a year and a half when I met Sue. An instructor at the community college where I coach football

had twisted my arm to come to his housewarming so there I was, on Sunday afternoon, sitting alone in the master

bedroom watching a Rams-Forty Niners game while everyone else was out in the living room enjoying the party.

Sue came in to put down her coat and we said hello. She left and then half an hour later came back to see if I was

still there. She teased me some about holing up all alone in the back room with the TV, and during the commercial

we chatted a bit. Well, she left again and came back with a plate of everything good that was being served out where

the party was going on. I looked at her then really for the first time and noticed how pretty she was. When the game

was over I joined the party but she had gone. I found out that she was a part-time instructor for the English

department, so on Monday I stopped in at her office and asked her to let me pay her back for the lunch she'd brought

me.

She said sure, if we could go somewhere with no TV, and we both laughed. But it wasn't really a joke. It would

not be an overstatement to say that when I met Sue, sports were my whole life. That's the thing about sports. If you

want to, you can pay total attention to them and not have any time left over for anything else. I ran every day. I

trained for marathons, I coached my players and travelled with them to games, I followed sports on TV, I worked

out.

But I was also lonely, and Sue was very appealing. Right from the beginning she paid a lot of attention to me

when I wanted it, and yet didn't interfere with what I wanted or needed to do. She had a son, Tim, who was six, and

I liked him okay, too. Her ex lived out of state and rarely saw the boy, so it was easy for him and me to be friends. I

could tell Tim wanted to be around a man.

Sue and I got married after we'd known each other a year, but pretty soon things started going wrong between us.

She complained that I never paid attention to her or Tim, that I was always gone and that when I was home all I

cared about was watching sports on TV. I complained that all she did was nag me and that she had known what I

was like when she met me. If she didn't like it, what was she doing here? I was mad at Sue a lot of the time but

somehow I couldn't be mad at Tim, too, and I knew that the way she and I were fighting was hurting him. Though I

never would admit it then, Sue was right. I was avoiding her and Tim. Sports gave me something to do, something to

talk about and think about that was safe and comfortable. I'd grown up in a family where sports was the only topic

you could discuss with my father, the only way you could get his attention.
It was pretty much all I knew about

being a man.

Well, Sue and I were just about ready to split up, we were fighting so much.
The more she'd pressure me, the

more I'd tune her out and escape into my running or the ball games or
whatever. Then one Sunday afternoon the

Miami Dolphins and the Oakland Raiders were in a play-off and the phone
rang. Sue was out with Tim, and I

remember how annoyed I felt at the interruption, at having to get up and
leave the TV. The call was from my

brother, telling me that my father had had a heart attack and that he was
dead.

I went to the funeral without Sue. We were fighting so much I wanted to go
alone, and I'm glad I did. Going back

there changed my whole life. Here I was, at my father's funeral, never
having been able to talk to him and on the

brink of my second divorce because I didn't know how to relate to my wife,
either. I felt like I was losing so much,

and I couldn't understand why it was all happening to me. I was a nice guy,
I worked hard, I never hurt anybody. I

felt sorry for myself and totally alone.

I rode back from the funeral with my youngest brother. He couldn't quit
crying. He kept talking about how it was

too late now, that he'd never be close to our father. Then, back at the house
everybody was talking about Dad, you

know how you do after a funeral, and people kept making these little jokes about Dad and sports, how much he

loved them, how he was always watching them. My brother-in-law, trying to be funny, said, "You know, this is the

first time I've been in this house when the TV wasn't on and he wasn't watching a game." I looked at my brother

and he started to cry again, not sadly but bitterly. All of a sudden I saw what my father had done all his life and what

I was doing, too. Just like him, I wouldn't let anybody be close to me, know me, talk to me. The TV was my armor.

I followed my brother outside and we took a drive together down to the lake. We sat there for a long time. As I

listened to him talk about how long he'd been waiting for Dad to notice him, I started really seeing myself for the

first time, realizing how much I'd become like my father. I thought about my step-son, Tim, always waiting like a

sad little puppy for some of my time and attention, and how I had kept myself too busy for him or his mom.

On the plane ride home I kept thinking about what I wanted people to say about me when I died, and that helped

me see what I had to do.

Back home with Sue I talked honestly, maybe for the first time in my whole life. We cried together and called

Tim in to be with us, and he cried, too.

After that, everything was wonderful for a while. We did things together, bike rides and picnics with Tim. We

went out and we had friends in. It was hard for me to back off the whole sports thing, but I had to quit almost cold

turkey for a while to get everything in perspective. I really wanted to be close to the people I loved, not to die and

leave people feeling the way my father had.

But it turned out to be harder for Sue than for me. After a couple of months had gone by, she told me that she was

going to take a part-time job on weekends. I couldn't believe it. That was our time to spend together. Now

everything was becoming reversed; she was running away from me! We both agreed to get some help.

In counseling Sue admitted that all our togetherness had been driving her crazy, that she felt like she didn't know

how to do it, how to be with me. We both talked about how hard it was to really be with another person. Even

though she'd nagged me about my old behavior, she now got uncomfortable when I paid attention to her. She wasn't

used to it. If anything, her family had been worse than mine in the attention-affection department. Her father, a

ship's captain, was always gone, and her mother liked it that way. Sue had grown up lonely, always wanting to be

close to someone, but like me she didn't know how.

We stayed in counseling for a while, and at the therapist's suggestion we joined the Stepfamily Association. As

Tim and I got closer, Sue had trouble letting me discipline him. She felt left out and like she was losing control of

him. But I knew I had to set my own limits with Tim if he and I were really going to have a relationship.

Being in that association helped me more than anything else. They had group meetings for families like ours.

Listening to other men struggling with their feelings was great for me. It helped me keep talking about mine to Sue.

We're still talking and we're still together, learning how to be close and to trust each other. Neither of us is as

good at it as we'd like to be, but we keep practicing. It's a brand-new game for both of us.

Erik's attraction to Sue

Erik, lonely in his self-imposed isolation, yearned to be loved and cared for without having to risk closeness. When

Sue approached him on the day they met, tacitly signaling her acceptance of his chief means of avoidance, his

obsession with sports, Erik wondered if he hadn't actually found his ideal woman-one who would care for him and

yet leave him alone. Though Sue subtly complained about his inattention by pointedly suggesting that their first date

be away from a TV, he still correctly assumed she had a high tolerance for distance. Otherwise, she would have

avoided him in the first place.

Actually, Erik's blatant lack of social skills and his inability to relate emotionally were attractive elements to Sue.

His clumsiness both endeared him to her and assured her that he wouldn't be able to reach out to other people,

including other women, and that was important. Sue, like so many women who love too much, deeply feared

abandonment. Better to be with someone who didn't quite meet her needs but whom she wouldn't lose than with

someone more loving and more lovable, who might leave her for someone else.

Also, Erik's social isolation provided her with a job to do, to bridge the chasm that stretched between him and

other people. She could interpret him and his idiosyncrasies to the rest of the world, attributing to shyness rather

than indifference his retreat from social contact. Simply put, he *needed* her.

Sue, on the other hand, was letting herself in for a situation that would replicate all the worst aspects of her

childhood years—the loneliness, the hopeful waiting for love and attention, the deep disappointment, and finally the

angry despair. As she tried to force Erik to change, her behavior only confirmed his fears about relationships and

caused him to retreat further.

But Erik did change dramatically, due to a series of profoundly moving events in his life. He became willing to

face his dragon, his fear of closeness, in order to avoid becoming another version of his cold, unapproachable father.

That he so strongly identified with lonely little Tim was a major factor in his commitment to change. But this change

in him forced a change in each member of the family. Sue, catapulted from being ignored and avoided to being

pursued and courted, was forced to face her own discomfort with actually receiving the loving attention she craved.

It would have been easy for Sue and Erik to stop at this point, with the tables turned and the pursuer now pursued,

the avoider now avoided. They could have simply exchanged roles, kept their proscribed distances, and maintained

their comfort level. But Sue and Erik each had the courage to look deeper, and then to try, with the help of therapy

and the support of an understanding and empathetic group, to risk really becoming closer as a couple and, with Tim,

as a family.

There is no way to overstate how important initial encounters are for us all. As a therapist, the impact a new client

has on me during our first meeting provides some of the most important information I will ever receive about that

person. Through what is said and what is left unsaid and by everything else that is revealed by physical appearance-

posture, grooming, facial expression, mannerisms and gestures, tone of voice, eye contact or lack of it, attitude, and

style—I receive an abundance of information about how the client operates in the world, particularly under stress. It

all adds up to getting a strong, undeniably subjective impression, providing me with an intuitive sense of what it is

going to be like to work with this person in the therapeutic relationship.

While, as a therapist, I very *consciously* try to assess my new client's approach to life, a very similar, though less

deliberately conscious, process ensues when any two people meet. Each tries to answer some questions about the

other, based on the wealth of information automatically telegraphed during those first few moments together. The

questions being silently asked are usually simple: Are you someone with whom I have anything in common? Can I

benefit in any way from cultivating a friendship with you? Are you fun to be with?

But often other questions are asked, depending on who these two people are, and what they want. For every

woman who loves too much, stronger questions reside beneath the obvious, rational, practical ones, questions we

strive all the harder to answer because they come from so deep inside us.

“Do you need me?” the woman who loves too much secretly asks.

“Will you take care of me and solve my problems?” is the silent query behind the spoken words of the man who

would choose her to be his partner.

7

Beauty and the Beast

“There are many men, ” said Beauty, “who make worse monsters than you, and I prefer you notwithstanding your looks. . .”

—*“Beauty and the Beast”*

In the stories from the two previous chapters, the women uniformly expressed a need to be of service, to help the

men with whom they became involved. Indeed, the opportunity to be of help to these men was the main ingredient

in the attraction they felt. The men, correspondingly, indicated that they had been searching for someone who could

help them, who could control their behavior, make them feel safe, or “save” them—who would be, in the words of

one of my male clients, the “woman in white.”

This theme of women redeeming men through the gift of their selfless, perfect, all-accepting love is not a modern

idea by any means. Fairy tales, embodying as they do the most important lessons of the culture that creates and

perpetuates them, have for centuries been offering versions of this drama. In “Beauty and the Beast,” a beautiful

young innocent meets a repulsive and frightening monster. To save her family from his wrath, she agrees to live

with him. By getting to know him, she eventually overcomes her natural loathing and finally even grows to love

him, in spite of his animal persona. When she does, of course, a miracle transpires, and he is freed of his beastly

guise and restored to his true, not only human but princely self. As the restored prince, he is a grateful and suitable

partner for her. Thus, her love and acceptance of him are repaid a thousandfold as she assumes her proper place by

his side, to share a life of blessed good fortune.

“Beauty and the Beast,” like every fairy tale that has endured centuries of telling and retelling, embodies a

profound spiritual truth in the context of a compelling story. Spiritual truths are very difficult to comprehend and

even more difficult to put into practice because they often go *against* contemporary values. Accordingly, there is a

tendency to interpret the fairy tale in a way that reinforces the cultural bias. By doing so, it is easy to miss its deeper

meaning altogether. Later we will explore the profound spiritual lesson that “Beauty and the Beast” holds for us. But

first we must look at the cultural bias this fairy tale *seems* to underscore, that a woman can change a man if she loves

him enough.

This belief, so powerful, so all-pervasive, permeates our individual and group psyches to the core. Reflected again

and again in our daily speech and behavior is the tacit cultural assumption that we can change someone for the better

through the force of our love, and that, if we are female, it is our duty to do so. When someone we care for is not

acting or feeling the way we wish, we cast about for ways to try to change that person’s behavior or mood, usually

with the blessing of others who give us advice and encouragement in our efforts (“Have you tried ... ?”). The

suggestions may be as contradictory as they are numerous, but few friends and relatives can resist making them.

Everyone’s focus is on how to help. Even the media gets into the act, not only reflecting this belief system but also,

with its influence, reinforcing and perpetuating it while continuing to delegate the job to women. For instance,

women's magazines as well as certain general-interest publications seem always to be publishing "how to help your

man become ..." articles, while corresponding "how to help your woman become ..." articles are virtually

nonexistent in equivalent magazines for men.

And we women buy the magazines and try to follow their advice, hoping to help the man in our life become what

we want and need him to be.

Why does the idea of changing someone unhappy or unhealthy or worse into our perfect partner appeal to us

women so deeply? Why is it so alluring, so enduring a concept?

To some, the answer would seem obvious: Embodied in the Judeo-Christian ethic is the concept of helping those

who are less fortunate than ourselves. We are taught that it is our duty to respond with compassion and generosity

when someone has a problem. Not to judge but rather to help; this seems to be our moral obligation.

Unfortunately, these virtuous motives by no means entirely explain the behavior of millions of women who

choose to take as partners men who are cruel, indifferent, abusive, emotionally unavailable, addictive, or otherwise

unable to be loving and caring. Women who love too much make these choices out of a driving need to control those

closest to them. That need to control others originates in a childhood during which many overwhelming emotions

are frequently experienced: fear, anger, unbearable tension, guilt, shame, pity for others and for self. A child

growing up in such an environment would be wracked by these emotions to the point of being unable to function

unless she developed ways to protect herself. Always, her tools for self-protection include a powerful defense

mechanism, *denial*, and an equally powerful subconscious motivation, control. All of us unconsciously employ

defense mechanisms such as denial throughout our lives, sometimes about rather trivial matters and at other times

about major issues and events. Otherwise, we would have to face facts about who we are and what we think and feel

that do not fit with our idealized image of ourselves and our circumstances. The mechanism of denial is particularly

useful in ignoring information with which we do not want to deal. For instance, not noticing (denying) how grown

up a child is becoming can be a way of avoiding feelings about that child's leaving home. Or not seeing and feeling

(denying) the gain of extra pounds that the mirror and tight clothing both reflect can allow our continued indulgence

in favorite foods.

Denial can be defined as a refusal to acknowledge reality on two levels: at the level of what is actually happening,

and at the level of feeling. Let's look at how denial helps to prepare a little girl to grow up and become a woman

who loves too much. As a child she may, for instance, have a parent who is rarely at home at night because of

extramarital affairs. As she tells herself, or is told by other family members, that he is "busy at work," she denies

that there is any problem between her parents or that anything abnormal is happening. This prevents her from feeling

fear for her family's stability and her own welfare. She also tells herself that he is working hard, which arouses

compassion rather than the anger and shame that would be felt if reality were faced. Thus she denies both reality and

her feelings about that reality, and she creates a fantasy that is easier to live with. With practice she becomes very

skilled at protecting herself from pain in this way, but at the same time she loses the ability to make a free choice

about what she is doing. Her denial operates automatically, unbidden.

In a dysfunctional family there is *always* a shared denial of reality. No matter how serious the problems are, the

family does not become dysfunctional *unless* there is denial operating. Further, should any family member attempt

to break through this denial by, for instance, describing the family situation in accurate terms, the rest of the family

will usually strongly resist that perception. Often ridicule will be used to bring that person back into line, or failing

that, the renegade family member will be excluded from the circle of acceptance, affection, and activity.

No one using the defense mechanism of denial makes a conscious choice to tune out reality, to wear blinders in

order to stop registering accurately what others are saying and doing. Nor does anyone in whom denial is operating

decide not to feel her own emotions. It all “just happens,” as the ego in its struggle to provide protection from

overwhelming conflicts, burdens, and fears, cancels out information and input that is too troublesome.

Perhaps a child whose parents frequently quarrel invites a friend to spend the night. During her friend’s visit both

girls are awakened late at night by the parents’ loud arguing. The visitor whispers, “Gee, your parents sure are noisy.

Why are they yelling like that?”

The embarrassed daughter, who has lain awake through many such quarrels, answers vaguely, “I don’t know,”

and then lies there in agonized self-consciousness while the shouting continues. The young guest has no idea why

her friend begins to avoid her soon thereafter.

The guest is shunned because she was witness to her friend’s family secret, and thus serves as a reminder of what

her friend would rather deny. Embarrassing events such as the parents’ fight during that visit are so painful that the

daughter is much more comfortable denying the truth, and so ever more assiduously avoids whatever and whomever

may threaten to dismantle her defense against pain. She does not want to feel her shame, her fear, her anger,

helplessness, panic, despair, pity, resentment, disgust. But because these strong and conflicting emotions are what

she would have to contend with if she let herself feel anything, *she prefers not to feel at all*. This is the source of her

need to control the people and events in her life. Through controlling what goes on around her, she tries to create for

herself a sense of safety. No shocks, no surprises, no feelings.

Anyone in an uncomfortable situation seeks control of it, to whatever degree is possible. This natural reaction

becomes exaggerated in members of an unhealthy family because there is so much pain. Remember Lisa's story,

when her parents pressured her to get better grades in school: there was some realistic hope that schoolwork could

be improved, but little chance that the mother's drinking behavior could be changed; so rather than face the

devastating implications of their impotence regarding the mother's alcoholism, they chose to believe that family life

would improve if and when Lisa did better in school.

Lisa too, remember, kept trying to improve (control) the situation by "being good." Her good behavior was not in

any way a wholesome expression of her delight with her family and with being alive. Quite the opposite. Each chore

she performed unasked represented a desperate attempt to rectify the family's unbearable circumstances, for which

she, as a child, felt responsible.

Children inevitably carry the guilt and blame for serious problems that affect their families. This is because

through their fantasy of omnipotence they believe both that they are the cause of the families' circumstances and that

they have the power to change them, for better or worse. Like Lisa, many unfortunate children are actively blamed

by parents or others in the family for problems over which the children have no control. But even without the verbal

blame of others, a child will assume a large portion of the responsibility for his or her family's troubles.

It is not easy or comfortable for us to consider that selfless behavior, "being good," and efforts to help may

actually be attempts to control, and not be altruistically motivated. I saw this dynamic simply and succinctly

represented by the sign on an office door in an agency where I once worked. Shown was a two-tone circle, the top

half of which was a bright yellow rising sun and the bottom half of which was painted black. The sign read Help Is

the Sunny Side of Control. It served to remind us counselors as well as our clients to constantly examine the motives

behind our need to change others.

When efforts to help are practiced by people who come from unhappy backgrounds, or who are in stressful

relationships in the present, the need to control must always be suspected. When we do for another what he can do

for himself, when we plan another's future or daily activities, when we prompt, advise, remind, warn, or cajole

another person who is not a young child, when we cannot bear for him to face the consequences of his actions so we

either try to change his actions or avert their consequences-this is controlling. Our hope is that if we can control him,

then we can control our own feelings where our life touches his. And of course the harder we try to control him, the

less we are able to. But we cannot stop.

A woman who habitually practices denial and control will be drawn into situations demanding those traits. Denial,

by keeping her out of touch with the reality of her circumstances and her feelings about those circumstances, will

lead her into relationships fraught with difficulty. She will then employ all her skills at helping/controlling in order

to make the situation more tolerable, all the while denying how bad it really is. Denial feeds the need to control, and

the inevitable failure to control feeds the need to deny.

This dynamic is illustrated in the following stories. These women have gained a good deal of insight into their

behaviors through involvement with therapy, and when appropriate because of the nature of their problems,

involvement in other support groups as well. They have been able to recognize their helping behavior for what it

was, a subconsciously motivated attempt to deny their own pain by controlling those closest to them. The intensity

of each woman's desire to be of help to her partner is a clue that it was much more a need than a choice.

Connie: thirty-two; divorced, with an eleven-year-old son

Before therapy I could not remember a single issue that my parents fought about. All I could remember was that

they constantly fought. Every day, every meal, almost every minute. They criticized each other, disagreed with each

other, and insulted each other, while my brother and I looked on. Dad would stay away at work, or wherever, as

much as he could, but sooner or later he'd have to come home and then it would begin again. My role in all of this

was first of all to pretend nothing was wrong, and second to try and distract either one or both of them by being

entertaining. I would toss my head and beam them a big smile and make a joke or do whatever silly thing I could

think of to capture their attention. Actually, I was scared to death inside, but being afraid got in the way of putting

on a good show. So I clowned and joked, and soon it became a full-time job, being cute. I got so much practice

when I was at home that after a while I started acting like that elsewhere, too. I was always polishing my act.

Basically, it came down to this: if anything was wrong I ignored it, and at the same time I tried to cover it up. That

last sentence encapsulizes what happened in my marriage.

I met Kenneth by the pool at my apartment when I was twenty. He was very tan, very good-looking in a

sunburnedsurfer sort of way. The fact that he was interested enough to want to live with me shortly after we met

made me feel that we had a lot going for us. Also, he was pretty cheerful, like me, so I thought we had all the

ingredients for being happy together.

Kenneth was a little vague, a little indecisive about his career, about what he wanted to do with his life, and I gave

him lots of encouragement there. I was sure I was helping him blossom, giving him needed support and direction. I

made virtually all the decisions concerning us as a couple, too, right from the beginning, but still somehow he did

just as he wanted. I felt strong and he felt free to lean on me. It was just what we each needed, I guess.

We had been living together for three or four months when an old girlfriend of his from work called him at home.

She was very surprised to hear that I was living with Kenneth. She told me that he'd never mentioned to her that he

was involved with anyone else, even though he saw her at least two or three times a week at work. All this came out

when she was stumbling around, trying to apologize for calling. Well, that shook me a little, and I asked Kenneth

about it. He told me he hadn't thought it was important to tell her. I remember the fear and the pain I felt then, but I

felt that way only for a moment. Then I cut off those feelings, and became very intellectual about it. I saw only two

choices: I could either fight with him about it or else let it drop and not expect him to see things the way I did. I

chose the latter, hands down, and made a joke of the whole thing. I had promised myself that I would never, ever

fight the way my parents had. In fact, the thought of getting angry literally nauseated me. Because I had been so

busy as a child entertaining everyone and didn't dare feel any strong emotions, by now powerful feelings really

frightened me, they knocked me off balance. Besides, I liked to keep things smooth, so I accepted what Kenneth said

and buried my doubts about how sincerely he was committed to me. We got married a few months later.

Fast-forward twelve years, when one day, at the suggestion of a friend at work, I found myself in the office of a

therapist. I thought I was still in total control of my life, but my friend had said she was worried about me and

insisted that I see someone for help.

Kenneth and I had been married for those twelve years and I thought we had been very happy, but now we were

separated at my suggestion. The therapist probed. What had gone wrong? I talked about lots of different things, and

in the midst of my ramblings mentioned that he had been leaving the house in the evening, at first once or twice a

week, then three or four times a week, and finally, for the past five years or so, six out of seven nights. Finally I had

said to him that it looked as if he really wanted to be elsewhere, so maybe he'd better move out.

The therapist asked me if I knew where he had been all those nights, and I told her I didn't know, that I'd never

asked him. I remember how surprised she looked. "All those nights over all those years and you never asked?" I told

her no, never, that I thought married couples had to give each other space. What I would do, though, was to talk to

him about how he should spend more time with our son, Thad. He always agreed with me, and then would go off the

same way in the evenings, maybe joining us to do something together on a Sunday now and then. I chose to see him

as someone who wasn't very bright, who needed those endless lectures from me to keep him somewhat on track as a

good father. I never could admit to myself that he was doing exactly what he wanted to do and that I was helpless to

change him. Actually, it got worse and worse over the years in spite of how perfectly I tried to behave. The therapist

asked me during that first session what I thought he'd been doing during the hours he was not at home. I got

annoyed. I just didn't want to think about it, because if I didn't then it couldn't hurt me.

I know now that Kenneth was incapable of being with just one woman, though he liked the security of an ongoing

relationship. He had given me a thousand clues about this behavior both before marriage and after: at company

picnics when he would disappear for hours, or at parties when he'd start talking to some woman and then they'd go

off together. Without even thinking about what I was doing in those situations, I'd turn on the charm to distract

people from what was happening and to show what a great sport I was ... and maybe to prove that I was lovable, not

someone a boyfriend or husband would want to get away from if he could.

It took me a long time in therapy to be able to remember that other women had been the problem with my parents'

marriage, too. Their fights had been about my father going off and not coming home, and my mother, while, not

saying it outright, would hint that he was unfaithful and then berate him for neglecting all of us. I thought that she

drove him away, and decided very consciously that I would never behave the way she did. So I held it all in and

worked on always smiling. That's what brought me to therapy. I was still smiling and sunny the day after my nine-

year-old son made a suicide attempt. I passed it off as a joke, which really alarmed my friend at work. I had held this

magical belief for so long that if I were nice and never got angry, everything would work out fine.

Seeing Kenneth as not too bright helped, too. I got to lecture and to try to organize his life, which was for him

probably a small price to pay to have someone cook and clean while he did exactly what he wanted, no questions

asked.

The depth of my denial that anything was wrong was so great that I couldn't let go of it until I got help. My son

was terribly unhappy, and I simply would not let that register. I tried to talk him out of it, made jokes about it, which

probably made him feel worse. I also refused to acknowledge that anything was wrong to anyone who knew us.

Kenneth was out of the house for six months and I still didn't tell anyone we were separated, which also made it

hard for my son. He had to keep the secret, too, and hide his hurt about all of it as well. I didn't want to talk to

anyone about it, so I wouldn't let him, either. I didn't see how desperately he needed to let out the secret. The

therapist really pushed me to start telling people that my perfect marriage was over. Oh, was it hard for me to admit

that. I think Thad's suicide attempt was simply his way of saying, "Hey, everybody! Something is wrong!"

Well, we're doing better now. Thad and I are still in therapy together and separately, learning how to talk to each

other and feel what we're feeling. There's been a rule in my therapy that I can't make a joke out of anything that

comes up during the hour. It's very hard for me to let go of that defense and feel what happens to me when I do, but

I'm lots better at it. When I go on dates I sometimes have thoughts about how this man or that needs me to

straighten some little details of his life for him, but I know better than to indulge in that kind of thinking for long.

Very occasional snipes at those sick little urges to “help” are the only cracks I’m allowed to make in therapy these

days. It feels good, laughing about how sick that behavior has been, rather than laughing to cover up everything

that’s been wrong.

Connie first used humor to distract herself and her parents from the threatening reality of their unstable relationship.

By employing all her charm and wit, she could draw their attention away from each other to her, and thus stop their

fighting, at least temporarily. Each time this occurred, she would experience herself as the glue holding these two

combatants together, with all the responsibility that role implied. These interactions spawned her need to control

others in order to feel safe and secure herself, and she exercised her control by distracting with humor. She learned

to be extremely sensitive to signs of anger and hostility in those around her, and to avert any such expression with a

well-timed quip or a disarming smile.

She had double cause to deny her own feelings: first, the thought of her parents’ potential breakup was too

frightening to bear; and second, any emotions of her own would only hamper her delivery of a good performance.

Soon she was denying her feelings automatically, just as she was seeking to manipulate and control those around her

automatically. Her shallow effervescence undoubtedly alienated some people, but others, like Kenneth, who had no

desire to relate on anything but a most superficial level, were attracted to that style.

That Connie could live for years with a man who would leave for hours at a time with increasing frequency, and

who finally began disappearing nightly, and *never* question him about his activities or whereabouts during those

absences is a measure of her great capacity for denial and the commensurate fear behind it. Connie didn't want to

know, didn't want to fight or confront, and most of all didn't want to feel the old childhood terror, that through

dissension her entire world would fall apart.

It was very difficult to get Connie to make a commitment to a therapeutic process that demanded she relinquish

her chief defense, humor. It was as though someone were asking her to give up breathing air; at some level she was

sure she would not survive without it. Her son's desperate plea that they both begin to face the painful reality of

their situation barely penetrated Connie's massive defenses. She was out of touch with reality very nearly to the

point of being truly crazy, and for a long time in therapy insisted on talking about only Thad's problems, denying

she had any of her own. Always "the strong one," she wasn't about to give up that position without a fight. But

slowly, as she became more willing to experience the panic that surfaced when she didn't resort to joking, she began

to feel safer. Connie learned that she had at her disposal, as an adult, far healthier coping mechanisms than those she

had so overused from childhood. She began to question, to confront, to express herself, and make her needs known.

She learned to be more honest than she had been in many, many years, with herself and with others. And she finally

was able to reclaim her humor, which now included healthy laughter at herself.

Pam: thirty-six; twice divorced, *mother of two teenage sons*

I grew up in a tense, unhappy home. My father had deserted my mother before I was born, and she became what

seemed to me the original “single parent.” No one else I knew had divorced parents, and living where we did, in a

very middle-class town in the '50s, we were made to feel like the oddity we were.

I worked hard in school and was a very pretty child, so teachers liked me. This helped a lot. At least academically

I could succeed. I became a real overachiever, getting straight A's all through grammar school. In junior high the

emotional pressure began to build so much that I couldn't really concentrate anymore, so my grades began to slip,

although I never dared to do badly. I always had the feeling that my mother was disappointed in me, and afraid that I

would embarrass her.

My mother worked hard as a secretary to support us, and I realize now she was exhausted all the time. She also

had a great deal of pride, and deep shame, I think, about being divorced. She was very uncomfortable when other

children would come to our house. We were poor, struggling to make ends meet, and yet we had this terrific need to

keep up appearances. Well, it was easier to do that if people never saw where we lived, so our house was not a

welcoming place, to say the least. When friends would ask me to spend the night with them, my mother would tell

me, “They don’t really want you.” She did that partly because she didn’t want to have to reciprocate and have them

stay at our house, but of course I didn’t know that when I was young; I believed what she told me, that I wasn’t

someone people wanted to be around.

I grew up believing there was something very wrong with me. I wasn’t sure what it was, but it had to do with

being unacceptable and unlovable. There was no love in our home, just duty. The worst part of it was that we could

never talk about the lie we were living, trying when we were out in the world to look better than we were—happier,

wealthier, more successful. The pressure to do so was intense, but it was virtually unspoken. And I never felt I could

even bring it off. I was so afraid that any moment it would become apparent that I just wasn’t as good as everybody

else. While I knew how to dress nicely and perform scholastically, I always felt like a fraud. Underneath, I knew I

was flawed to the very core. If people liked me it was because I was fooling them. If they knew me well, they would

go away.

Growing up without a father made it worse, I suppose, because I never learned how to relate to males in a give-

and-take way. They were exotic animals, forbidding and fascinating at the same time. My mother never told me

much about my father, but the little she said made me feel he wasn't anything to be proud of, so I didn't ask

questions; I was afraid of what I might learn. She didn't like men much at all, and hinted that basically they were

dangerous, selfish, and not to be trusted. But I couldn't help it, I found them all fascinating, starting with the little

boys in kindergarten my first day of school. I was looking hard for what was missing in my life, but I didn't know

what it was. I guess it was that I so badly wanted to be close to somebody, to give and receive affection. I knew that

men and women, husbands and wives, were supposed to love each other, but my mother was telling me, in subtle

and not so subtle ways, that men didn't make you happy, they made you miserable, and they did that by leaving you,

running off with your best friend, or by betraying you in some other way. Those were the kinds of stories I heard

from her when I was growing up. I probably decided very early that I would find myself someone who wouldn't,

couldn't, go away, maybe someone nobody else would want. Then I guess I forgot that I'd ever made such a

decision. I just kept on acting it out.

I could never have put it into words when I was growing up, but the only way I knew how to be with someone,

especially someone male, was if he needed me. Then he wouldn't leave me, because I'd be helping him and he'd be

grateful.

Not surprisingly, my first boyfriend was disabled. He had been in a car accident and his back had been broken. He

wore leg braces and used steel crutches to walk. I used to pray at night that God would make me the one who

couldn't walk instead of him. We would go to dances together and I would sit by him all night long. Now, he was a

nice enough boy, and certainly a girl could have enjoyed being with him just for his company. But I had another

reason. I was with him because it was *safe*; since I was doing him a favor, I wouldn't be rejected and get hurt. It was

like having an insurance policy against pain. I was really crazy about this boy, but I know now that I chose him

because, like me, he had something wrong with him. His flaw showed, so I could be comfortable feeling all this pain

and pity for him. He was, by far, my healthiest boyfriend. After him came juvenile delinquents, underachievers—

losers, all of them.

When I was seventeen I met my first husband. He was in trouble in school and flunking out. His father and

mother were divorced but still fighting with each other. Compared to his background, mine looked *good!* I could

relax a little, not feel so ashamed. And of course, I felt so sorry for him. He was quite a rebel, but I thought that was

because no one before me had ever really understood him.

Also, I had at least twenty IQ points over him. And I needed that edge. It took all that and more to make me even

begin to believe I was his equal, and that he wouldn't leave me for someone better.

My whole relationship with him, and we were married twelve years, was one of refusing to accept who he was

and instead trying to make him into what I thought he ought to be. I was sure he would be so much happier and feel

so much better about himself if he would just allow me to show him how to parent our children, how to run his

business, how to relate to his family. I had continued going to school, majoring, naturally, in psychology. My own

life was so out of control, so miserable, and there I was, studying how to take care of everyone else. To be fair to

myself, I really was looking hard for answers, but I thought that the key to my happiness was to get him to change.

He obviously needed my help. He wasn't paying his bills or his taxes. He made the children and me promises he

didn't keep. He infuriated his customers who would call me to complain about how he hadn't followed through on

jobs he had started for them.

I wasn't able to leave him until I could finally see who he really was, instead of who I wanted him to be. I spent

the last three months of the marriage just watching-not giving those interminable lectures of mine, but just keeping

quiet and watching. That's when I realized I could not live with who he was. All along, I'd been waiting to be able

to love the wonderful man that I thought with my help he could become. Only my hope that he'd change for me kept

me going all those years.

It still wasn't clear to me, though, that I had a pattern of picking men who were not, in my opinion, fine just as

they were, but rather whom I saw as needing my help. I only caught on to that after several more relationships with

impossible men: one was addicted to pot; one was gay; one was impotent; and one, with whom I finally had a long

relationship, was supposedly very unhappily married. When that involvement ended (disastrously), I couldn't

continue to believe it was all bad luck. I knew I must have had a part in what had happened to me.

By this time I was a licensed psychologist, and my whole life revolved around helping people. I know now that

my field is full of people like me, who help others all day long at work and still feel the need to "help" in their

personal relationships, too. My entire method of relating to my sons was to remind them, encourage them, coach

them, and worry about them. That was all I knew about loving, to try to help people and to be concerned about them.

I hadn't the slightest clue how to accept others as they were, probably because I had never accepted myself.

Life did me a real favor at this point. Everything fell apart for me. When my affair with the married man ended,

my boys were both in trouble with the law, and my health was completely shot. I just couldn't keep on taking care of

everyone else. It was my son's probation officer who told me I'd better start working on taking care of myself. And I

was somehow able to hear him. After all those years in psychology, he was the one who finally got through to me. It

took having my whole life fall down around my ears to make me look at myself and the depth of my own self-

hatred.

One of the hardest things I had to face was that my mother really hadn't wanted the responsibility of raising me,

hadn't wanted me, period. I can understand now, as an adult, how hard it must have been for her. But all those

messages she gave me about other people not wanting me around-she was really describing *herself*. And as a child I

knew it at some level, but I couldn't face it, I guess, so I ignored it. Pretty soon I ignored a lot. I didn't let myself

hear the criticisms she constantly threw at me or how angry she got if I had fun. It was too threatening to let myself

experience all the hostility she directed toward me, so I stopped feeling, I stopped responding, and I poured all my

energy into being good and helping others. As long as I was working on everybody else, I never had time to pay

attention to myself, to feel my own pain.

It was hard on my pride, but I got into a self-help group made up of women who had similar problems with men.

The group was the kind I would usually be leading professionally, and there I was, just a humble participant.

Though my ego took a beating, this group helped me look at my need to manage and control others, and helped me

to stop doing it. I began to heal inside. Instead of working on everybody else, I finally was taking care of myself.

And there was so much work to do. Once I began concentrating on trying to let go of fixing everyone in my life, I

practically had to stop talking! Everything I had said for so long had been “helpful.” It was a terrific shock to me to

hear how much managing and controlling I was doing. Altering my behavior has caused even my professional work

to change radically. I’m much more able to be with clients in a supportive way while they work out their problems.

Before, I felt this huge responsibility to fix them. Now it’s more important that I understand them.

Some time passed, and then a nice man came along. He didn't need me at all. There was really nothing wrong

with him. I was very uncomfortable at first, learning how to be with him, instead of trying to make him over

completely. After all, that had been my whole way of relating to people. But I learned not to do anything except just

be myself, and it seems to be working. I feel as if my life has just begun to make some sense. And I keep going to

my group to keep from slipping back into my old ways. Sometimes everything in me still wants to run the show, but

I know better than to give in to that need anymore.

How does all this relate to denial and control?

Pam began by denying the reality of her mother's anger and hostility toward her. She didn't allow herself to feel

what it meant to be an unwelcome object rather than a beloved child in her family. She didn't allow herself to feel,

period, because it hurt too much. Later this inability to perceive and experience her emotions actually would enable

her to become involved with the men she chose. Her emotional warning system, which would otherwise steer her

away from them, was inoperative at the beginning of each relationship, due to highly developed denial. Because she

couldn't feel what it was like, emotionally, to be with these men, she could perceive them only as needing her

understanding and her help.

Pam's pattern of developing relationships in which her role was to understand, encourage, and improve her

partner is a formula often employed by women who love too much, and it usually yields exactly the opposite of the

hoped-for result. Rather than a grateful, loyal partner who is bonded to her through his devotion and his dependence,

such a woman finds she soon has a man who is increasingly rebellious, resentful, and critical of her. Out of his own

need to maintain his autonomy and self-respect, he must cease to see her as the solution to all his problems, and

make her instead the source of many if not most of them.

When this happens and the relationship crumbles, the woman is plunged into a deeper sense of failure and

despair. If she cannot even make someone so needy and inadequate love her, how could she ever hope to earn and

keep the love of a healthier, more appropriate man? This explains why often such women follow one bad

relationship with another that is even worse-because they feel increasingly less worthy with each such failure.

It also makes clear how difficult it will be for such a woman to break this pattern unless she gains an

understanding of the basic need that drives her. Pam, like many others in the helping professions, used her career to

bolster her fragile sense of worth. She could relate only to neediness in others, including her clients, children,

husbands, and other partners. In every area of her life, she sought ways to avoid feeling her deep sense of

inadequacy and inferiority. Not until Pam began to experience the powerful healing properties of understanding and

acceptance that she got from *peers* in her group did her self-esteem grow so that she could begin to relate in a

healthy way to others, including a healthy man.

Celeste: forty-five; divorced, mother of three children who live with their father

abroad

I've probably been with more than a hundred men in my life, and I'll bet, looking back, that every one of them was

either too many years younger than I or a con artist or dependent on drugs or alcohol or gay or crazy. A hundred

impossible men! How did I find them all?

My father was a chaplain in the army. That meant that he pretended to be a kind, loving man everywhere but at

home, where he didn't bother to be anything but what he was—mean, demanding, critical, and selfish. He and my

mother both believed that we children existed to help him carry off his professional charade. We were supposed to

look perfect by getting straight As, being social charmers, and never getting into trouble. Given the atmosphere at

home, this was impossible. You could cut the tension with a knife anytime my father was in the house. He and my

mother were not close at all. She was furious all the time. Not loudly fighting with him, just quietly, grimly seething.

Whenever my father did anything she asked him to, he screwed it up on purpose. Once there was something wrong

with the front door and he fixed it with these nails, great big nails, which ruined the whole thing. We all learned to

leave him alone.

After retirement he was home every day and every night, sitting in his chair, glowering. He didn't say much, but

just his being there made life difficult for all of us. I really hated him. I couldn't see then that he had problems of his

own or that we did, too, in the way we reacted to him and let him control us by his presence. It was a continuing

contest: who would control whom? And he always won, passively.

Anyway, I had long since developed into the rebel in the family. I was angry, just like my mother, and the only

way I could express it was to reject all the values my parents embodied, to get out and try to be the opposite of

everything and everyone in my family. I think it was the fact that we looked so normal from the outside that

infuriated me the most. I wanted to scream from rooftops how awful our family was, but no one else seemed to

notice. My mother and sisters were willing to have me be the one with the problem, and I obliged by playing my

part to the hilt.

I started an underground newspaper at the base high school, which stirred up a lot of trouble. Then I went away to

college, and as soon as I had the chance I left the country. I couldn't get far enough away from home to satisfy me. I

was outwardly very rebellious, but inside there was nothing but confusion.

My first sexual experience occurred when I was abroad in Europe, and it was not with another American. It was

with a young African student. He was eager to learn about the States, and I felt like his mentor-stronger, wiser, more

worldly. The fact that I was white and he was black caused a lot of waves. I didn't care; it reinforced my view of

myself as a rebel.

A few years later, still in college, I met and married a Britisher. He was an intellectual from a wealthy family. I

respected that. He was also twenty-seven and still a virgin. Again, I was the teacher, which made me feel strong and

independent. And in control.

We were married seven years, living abroad, and I was terribly restless and unhappy but I didn't know why. Then

I met a young orphan student and began a really tempestuous affair with him, during which I left my husband and

two children. This young man had been involved sexually only with men until he met me. We lived together for two

years in my apartment. He had male lovers as well, but I didn't care. We tried all kinds of things sexually, broke all

the rules. It was an adventure for me, but after a while I got restless again, and eased him out of my life as a lover,

though we're still friends today. After him came a long series of involvements with some real low-life types. They

all, at the very least, moved in with me. Most of them also borrowed money from me, sometimes thousands of

dollars, and a couple of them drew me into some very illegal schemes.

I had no idea that I had a problem, even with all this going on. Since each of these men was getting something

from me, I felt like the strong one, the one in charge of things.

Then I came back to the States and got involved with a man who was probably the worst of the lot. He was so

alcoholic that he had suffered brain damage. He was easily roused to violence, he rarely bathed, didn't work, and

was facing jail time for offenses related to his drinking. I went with him to the agency where he attended a program

for convicted drunk drivers and the instructor there suggested that I see one of their counselors, because it was

apparent that I was also having problems. It was apparent to the drunk-driving class instructor, but not to me; I

thought it was this man I was with who had all the problems, and that I was fine. But I did go to a counseling

session, and right away this woman got me talking about how I related to men. I'd never looked at my life from that

angle before. I decided to continue to see her, and that's when I was helped to begin to see the pattern I'd created.

I had shut off so much feeling as a child that I required all the drama these men provided, just to feel alive.

Trouble with the police, involvement with drugs, financial schemes, dangerous people, crazy sex—these had all

become the ordinary stuff of life to me. In fact, even with all of that I still couldn't feel anything much.

I stayed with the counseling and began to go to a women's group at the counselor's suggestion. There I slowly

began to learn some things about myself, about my attraction to unhealthy or inadequate men whom I could

dominate through my efforts to help them. Even though I'd been in analysis in England for years and years,

endlessly talking about my hatred for my father and my anger at my mother, I had never related it to my obsession

with impossible men. Although I'd always thought analysis benefited me immensely, it had never helped me change

my patterns. In fact, when I examine my behavior, I see I only got worse over those years.

Now, in counseling and group, as I am beginning to get better, my relationships with men are getting a little

healthier, too. A while back I got involved with a diabetic who wouldn't take his insulin, and I was in there trying to

help him, with lectures about the danger of what he was doing and with attempts to improve his self-esteem. It may

sound funny, but my involvement with him was a step *up*! At least he wasn't a full-on addict. Still, I was practicing

my familiar role as the strong woman in charge of a man's welfare. I'm leaving men alone for a while because I've

finally realized that I really don't want to take care of a man, and that's still the only way I know how to relate to

them. They've just been my way of avoiding taking care of myself. I'm working on learning to love myself, to take

care of me for a change, and to let go of all these distractions, because that's what men have been in my life. It's

scary, though, because I was much better at taking care of them than I am at caring for myself.

Again, we see the twin themes of denial and control. Celeste's family was in emotional chaos but that chaos was

never openly acknowledged or expressed. Even her rebellion against the family's rules and norms only subtly hinted

at the family's deeply troubled core. She was shouting, but none of them would listen. In her frustration and

isolation she turned off all her feelings save one, anger: at her father for not being there for her, and at the rest of the

family for refusing to acknowledge their problems or her pain. But her anger was free-floating; she did not

understand that it stemmed from her helplessness to change the family she loved and needed. She could not get any

of her emotional needs for love and security met in this milieu, so she sought relationships that she *could* control,

with others who were not as educated or experienced, not as well-off financially or well-set socially as herself. How

deep her need for this pattern of relating became is revealed by the extreme inadequacy of her last partner, a late-

stage alcoholic who came very close to fitting the stereotype of the skid-row bum. And still Celeste, bright,

sophisticated, educated, and worldly, missed all the cues as to how very sick and inappropriate this liaison was. Her

denial of her own feelings and perceptions and her need to control the man and the relationship far outweighed her

intelligence. A major part of Celeste's recovery involved her letting go of her intellectual analysis of herself and her

life and beginning to feel the deep emotional pain that accompanied the tremendous isolation she had always

endured. Her numerous and exotic sexual involvements were only possible because she felt so little connection with

other human beings and with her own body. Indeed, these involvements actually prevented her from having to risk

real closeness with others. The drama and excitement substituted for the threatening intensity of intimacy. Recovery

meant holding still with herself, without a man to sidetrack her, and feeling her feelings, including the painful

isolation. It also meant having other women who understood her behavior and feelings validate her efforts to change.

For Celeste, recovery requires learning to relate to and trust other women, as well as relating to and trusting herself.

Celeste must develop a relationship with herself before she can relate in a healthy way with a man, and she still

has some hard work to do in that area. Basically, all her encounters with men were merely reflections of the anger,

chaos, and rebellion within her, and her attempts to control those men were also attempts to subdue the inner forces

and feelings that drove her. Her work is with herself, and as she gains more inner stability this will be reflected in

her interactions with men. Until she learns to love and trust herself, she will not be able to experience either loving

or trusting a man, or being loved and trusted by him.

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Many women make the mistake of looking for a man with whom to develop a relationship without first

developing a relationship with themselves; they run from man to man, looking for what is missing within. The

search must begin at home, within the self. No one can ever love us enough to fulfill us if we do not love ourselves,

because when in our emptiness we go looking for love, we can only find more emptiness. What we manifest in our

lives is a reflection of what is deep inside us: our beliefs about our own worth, our right to happiness, what we

deserve in life. When those beliefs change, so does our life.

Janice: thirty-eight; married, mother of three teenage sons

Sometimes, when you've worked so hard to keep up appearances on the outside, it's practically impossible to show

anybody what's really going on inside. It's hard to even know yourself. For years and years I'd been hiding what

went on at home while putting on a great show out there in public. I began, early as a child in school, taking

responsibility, running for office, being in charge. It felt wonderful. Sometimes I think I could have stayed in high

school forever. There, I was somebody who could succeed. I was homecoming queen, captain of the drill team, and

senior class vice-president. Robbie and I were even voted cutest couple for the yearbook. Everything looked so

good.

At home it looked good, too. My dad was a salesman and made lots of money. We had a nice big house with a

pool and just about everything we wanted in the way of material things. What was missing was all on the inside,

where it didn't show.

My dad was on the road nearly all the time. He loved staying in motels, picking women up in bars. Whenever he

was home with my mom, they would get into terrible fights. Then she and whoever else was home at the time would

have to listen to him compare her with all the other women he knew. They fought physically, too. When that

happened, my brother would try to break it up or I'd have to call the police. It was really awful.

After he was gone, back on the road again, my mother would usually have these long talks with my brother and

me, asking us if she should leave Dad. Neither of us wanted to be responsible for that decision, even though we

hated their fighting, so we'd try to avoid answering. But she never did go, because she was too afraid of losing the

financial support he provided. She started seeing the doctor a lot and began taking pills instead, in order to stand it.

Then she didn't care what Dad did. She'd just go off to her room, take an extra pill or two, and stay inside with the

door shut. After she was inside her room, I had to take over a lot of her responsibilities, but in some ways I didn't

mind. It was better than listening to the fighting.

By the time I met my future husband I was really good at taking over for other people.

Robbie already had a drinking problem when we met in our junior year of high school. He even had a nickname,

“Burgie,” because he drank so much Burgermeister beer. But that didn’t bother me. I was sure I could take care of

whatever bad habits Robbie had. I’d always been told that I was mature for my age, and I believed it.

There was something so sweet about Robbie that I was immediately drawn to him. He reminded me of a cocker

spaniel, all soft and appealing, with great big brown eyes. We began dating when I let it be known to his best friend

that I was interested. I practically arranged the whole thing myself. I felt I had to make it happen because he was so

shy. We went together steadily from then on. Occasionally he wouldn’t show up for a date, and the next day he’d be

very sorry, very apologetic that he’d gotten carried away with drinking and had forgotten. I’d lecture and scold and

finally forgive him. He almost seemed grateful that he had me to keep him on the straight and narrow. I was always

as much a mother to him as a girlfriend. I used to hem his pants, and remind him about his family members’

birthdays, and advise him about what to do in school and with his career. Robbie had nice parents, but there were six

kids. His grandfather, who was ill, lived with them, too. Everybody was a little distracted with the pressure of it all,

and I was more than willing to make up for the attention Robbie wasn't getting at home.

The draft caught up with him after he'd been out of high school a couple of years. It was during the early buildup

in Vietnam, and if a young man was married he was exempt from service. I couldn't bear the thought of what would

happen to Robbie in Vietnam. I could say I was afraid he would be injured or killed, but if I'm honest I have to

admit I was even more afraid that he would grow up over there and not need me anymore when he came back.

I made it very clear that I was willing to marry him to keep him out of the service, and so that's what we did. We

got married when we were both twenty. I remember he got so drunk at the wedding reception that I had to drive so

we could leave on our honeymoon. It made a great joke.

After our sons were born, Robbie's drinking got worse. He would tell me he needed to get away from all the

pressure, and that we had married too young. He went on a lot of fishing trips, and had lots of nights out with the

boys. I never really got angry, because I felt so sorry for him. Each time he drank I made excuses for him and tried

harder to make it nicer at home.

I suppose we could have gone on forever that way, with things getting a little worse each year, except that his

drinking was finally noticed at work. His coworkers and boss confronted him, and gave him the choice of getting

sober or losing his job. Well, he got sober.

That's when the trouble started. All those years that Robbie had been drinking and messing up I knew two things:

one, he needed me; and two, no one else would put up with him. And that was the only way I could feel safe. Yes, I

had to put up with a lot, but that was okay. I'd come from a home where my father did much worse things than

Robbie ever did. My dad beat my mother and had lots of affairs with women he met in bars. So having a husband

who just drank too much was really not that hard on me. Besides, I could run the house the way I wanted to, and

when he really blew it I'd scold and cry and he'd straighten out for a week or two. I didn't really want any more than

that.

Of course, I didn't know any of this until he got sober. All of a sudden my poor, helpless Robbie was going to

A.A. meetings every night, making friends, having serious talks on the phone with people I didn't even know. Then

he got himself a sponsor in A.A., and this man was the one to whom he turned every time he had a problem or a

question. I felt like I'd been fired from my job, and I was furious! Again, if I'm going to be honest I have to admit I

liked the whole situation better when he was drinking. Before sobriety I used to call his boss with phony excuses

when Robbie was too hungover to go to work. I lied to his family and friends about the trouble he got into at work or

driving drunk. In general, I ran interference between him and life. Now I couldn't even get in the game. Whenever

something difficult had to be handled, he'd get on the phone with his sponsor, who always insisted that Robbie meet

problems head-on. Then he'd face it, whatever it was, and afterwards he'd call his sponsor again to give him a

report. Through it all, I was left on the sidelines.

Although I'd lived for years with an irresponsible; unreliable, and very dishonest man, it was when Robbie had

been sober for nine months and was improving in every area that we found we were fighting more than we ever had.

What made me angriest was that he would call his A.A. sponsor to find out how to handle *me*. It seemed I was the

biggest threat to his sobriety!

I was preparing to file for divorce when his sponsor's wife called me and asked if we could meet for coffee. I very

reluctantly agreed, and she just laid it out. She talked about how hard it had been for her when her husband got

sober, because she could no longer manage him and every aspect of their life together. She talked about how much

she had resented his A.A. meetings and especially his sponsor, and that she considered it a miracle that they were

still married, not to mention that they were actually happy. She said that Al-Anon had helped her enormously, and

urged me to attend a few meetings.

Well, I only half-listened. I still believed that I was fine and also that Robbie owed me a lot for putting up with

him all those years. I felt he should be -trying to make that up to me, rather than going to meetings all the time. I had

no idea how hard it was for him to stay sober, and he wouldn't have dared to tell me because I would have told him

how to do it—as though I knew anything about it!

About this time, one of our sons started stealing and having other problems at school. Robbie and I went to a

parent conference and somehow it came out that Robbie was a sober alcoholic attending A.A. The counselor

strongly suggested that our son go to Alateen and asked if I was in Al-Anon. I felt cornered, but this woman had a

lot of experience with families like ours and she was very gentle with me. All our sons started going to Alateen, but

I still stayed away from Al-Anon. I went ahead with divorce proceedings and moved myself and the kids to an

apartment. When it was time to settle all the details, the boys quietly told me that they wanted to live with their dad.

I was devastated. After I left Robbie I had focused all my attention on them, and here they were choosing him over

me! I had to let them go. They were old enough to decide for themselves. That left me alone with just me. And I had

never been alone with just me before. I was terrified and depressed and hysterical, all at once.

After a few days of being totally out of commission, I called Robbie's sponsor's wife. I wanted to blame her

husband and A.A. for all my pain. She listened to me scream at her for a long time. Then she came over and sat with

me while I cried and cried and cried. She took me to an Al-Anon meeting the next day and I listened, even though I

was terrifically angry and afraid. I began, very slowly, to see how sick I was. I went to meetings every day for three

months. After that I went three or four times a week for a long time.

You know, in those meetings I actually learned to laugh at the things I had taken so seriously, like trying to

change others, and managing and controlling other people's lives. And I would listen to other people talk about how

hard it was for them to take care of themselves instead of focusing all their attention on the alcoholic. That was true

for me, too. I had no idea what I needed to make me happy. I'd always believed I'd be happy as soon as everybody

else shaped up. I saw people there who were just so beautiful, and some of them were with partners who were still

drinking. They'd learned to let go and get on with their own lives. But I also heard from all of them how hard it was

to let go of our old ways of taking care of everything and everybody, and acting like a parent to the alcoholic.

Hearing some of these people talk about how they got through the problem of being alone and the feelings of

emptiness helped me find my way, too. I learned to stop feeling sorry for myself, and to be grateful for what I did

have in my life. Pretty soon I wasn't crying for hours anymore and found I had a lot of time on my hands, so I went

to work part-time. That helped, too. I began to feel good about doing something all by myself. It wasn't long before

Robbie and I were talking about getting back together. I was dying to jump right back in, but his sponsor advised

him to wait awhile. His sponsor's wife said the same thing to me. I didn't understand it then, but other people in the

program all agreed with them, so we held off. I see now why that was necessary. It was important for me to wait

until there was somebody home inside me before I went back with Robbie.

At first I was so empty I felt like the wind was blowing through me. But with each decision I made for myself,

that empty place filled in a little. I had to find out who I was, what I liked and disliked, what I wanted for myself and

my life. I couldn't learn those things unless I had time alone, without anybody else to think about and worry over,

because when someone else was around I much preferred running that person's life over living my own.

When we began to think about getting back together I watched myself start phoning Robbie about every little

thing, wanting to meet him and talk over every detail. I could feel myself going backward each time I called him, so

finally when I needed someone to talk to, I'd go to a meeting or call someone in the program. It was like weaning

myself, but I knew that I had to learn to let things flow between us, rather than jumping in all the time and trying to

force things to go the way I wanted. This pulling back was incredibly difficult for me. I think it may have been much

harder for me to leave Robbie alone than it was for him to leave alcohol alone. But I knew I had to. Otherwise, I

would have slipped into all the old roles again. It's funny: I finally realized that not until I *liked* living alone was I

ready to go back into the marriage. Almost a year went by, and somewhere in there the kids and Robbie and I all got

back together. He had never wanted a divorce, though now I can't understand why not. I was so controlling of all of

them. Anyway, I got better, and let go of all of them more, and we're really okay now. The boys are in Alateen,

Robbie's in A.A., and I'm in Al-Anon. I think we're each healthier than we've ever been because we're each living

our own life.

There is very little to add to Janice's story. Her tremendous need to be needed, to have a weak, inadequate man, and

to control that man's life were all ways to deny and avoid the inevitable emptiness at her core, arising from her early

years with her family. It has already been noted that children in dysfunctional families feel responsible for their

family's problems and also for solving them. There are basically three ways in which these children attempt to

“save” their families: by being invisible, by being bad, or by being good.

To be invisible means to never ask for anything, never cause trouble, never make any kind of demand. The child

who chooses this role scrupulously avoids adding any burden to her already stressed family. She stays in her room

or blends into the wallpaper; she says very little and makes what she does say noncommittal. In school she is neither

bad nor good—in fact, she is rarely remembered at all. Her contribution to the family is to not exist. As for her own

pain, she is numb, she feels nothing.

To be bad is to be the rebel, the juvenile delinquent, the one who waves a red flag. This child sacrifices herself,

agreeing to be the family's scapegoat, the family's problem. She makes herself the focus for the family's pain,

anger, fear, and frustration. Her parents' relationship may be disintegrating, but she provides them with a safe topic

they can work on together. They can ask, “What are we going to do about Joanie?” instead of, “What are we going

to do about our marriage?” This is how she tries to “save” the family. And she has only one feeling, anger. It covers

her pain and her fear.

To be good is to be what Janice was, an achiever out in the world, whose accomplishments are aimed at

redeeming the family and filling the emptiness inside. Appearing happy, bright, and enthusiastic serves to cover the

tension, fear, and anger inside. Looking good becomes much more important than feeling good—than feeling

anything.

Janice eventually needed to add taking care of someone to her list of accomplishments, and Robbie, replicating

her father's alcoholism and her mother's passive dependency, was a likely choice. He (and after he left, the children)

became her career, her project, and her way of avoiding her own feelings.

Without her husband or her sons on whom to focus her attention, a breakdown was inevitable, because they had

been the primary means by which she could avoid her pain, emptiness, and fear. Without them, her feelings

overwhelmed her. Janice had always seen herself as the strong one, the person who helped, encouraged, and advised

those around her, yet her husband and sons actually served a more important role for her than she did for them. 'Even

though they lacked her "strength" and "maturity," they could function without her. She could not function without

them. That this family ultimately survived intact is due largely to their good fortune at seeing an experienced

counselor and to the honesty and wisdom of Robbie's sponsor and his wife. Each of these people recognized that

Janice's disease was as debilitating as Robbie's, and her recovery every bit as important.

Ruth: twenty-eight; married, mother of two daughters

I knew, even before we married, that Sam had problems with sexual performance. We'd attempted to make love

together a couple of times, and it never really worked, but both of us blamed it on the fact that we weren't married.

We shared very strong religious convictions—in fact, we met in night classes at a religious college and went

together for two years before we ever tried to have sexual relations. By then we were engaged, with the wedding

date set, so we shrugged off Sam's impotence as God's way of protecting us from sinning before we were married. I

thought that Sam was just a very shy young man, and that I'd be able to help him get over that once we were

married. I looked forward to sort of leading him through it all. Except that's not the way it worked out.

On our wedding night Sam was all ready to go, and then he lost his erection and asked me quietly, "Are you still a

virgin?" When I didn't answer right away he said, "I didn't think so," and he got up, went in the bathroom, and

closed the door. We were each crying, on our opposite sides of that door. It was a long, disastrous night, the first of

many more just like it.

I had been engaged before I met Sam to a man I didn't even like very much, but he'd swept me off my feet once

and we'd had sex together, and after that I felt I had to marry him to redeem myself. He eventually got tired of me

and just drifted away. I was still wearing his ring when I met Sam. I guess I expected to be celibate forever after that

experience, but Sam was so kind and never pressured me to be sexual with him, so I felt safe and accepted. I could

see that Sam was even less sophisticated and more conservative than I was in the area of sex, and that made me feel

in control of the situation. That fact, along with our shared religious convictions, assured me we were perfect for

each other.

After our marriage, because of my guilt, I took on all the responsibility for curing Sam's impotence. I read every

book I could find, while he refused to read any. I kept all those books, hoping he would read them. I found out later

that he did read them all, when I wasn't looking. He was frantic for answers, too, but I didn't know that because

Sam didn't want to talk about it. He'd ask me if I was willing to just be friends and I'd lie and say yes. The worst

part for me was not the lack of sex in our lives; I didn't care much about that, anyway. It was my guilt, my feeling

that I had ruined everything somehow, right at the beginning.

Something I hadn't tried yet was therapy. I asked him if he'd go. He said absolutely not. I'd become obsessed by

then, with the feeling that I was depriving him of this wonderful sex life he could have had except for the fact that

he'd married me. I still felt that maybe there was something a therapist could tell me that would help, something the

books had left out. By this time I was desperate to help Sam. And I still loved him. I realize now that a great deal of

my love for him at that time was really a combination of guilt and pity, but there was genuine caring for him, too.

He was a good, sweet, kind man.

Anyway, I went to my first appointment, which was with a counselor who had been recommended by Planned

Parenthood as having expertise in human sexuality. I was only there to help Sam, and I told her that. She said that

we couldn't help Sam because Sam wasn't there in the office, but we could work with me, and how did I feel about

what was and wasn't happening between Sam and me. I wasn't at all prepared to talk about my feelings. I didn't

even know I had any. We spent that whole first hour with me trying to shift the topic back to Sam, and she leading

me gently back to myself and my feelings. It was the first time I'd ever seen how skilled I was at avoiding myself,

and mostly because she was so honest with me I decided to see her again, even though we weren't working on what

I was sure was the *real* problem—Sam.

Between our second and third sessions, I had a very vivid and disturbing dream, in which I was chased and

threatened by a figure whose face I couldn't see. When I told my therapist about it she helped me work with the

dream until I realized that the threatening figure was my father. This was the first step in a long process that finally

led to my being able to remember that my father had sexually molested me frequently between the years when I was

nine and fifteen. I had completely buried this entire aspect of my life, and when the memories began to return I

could let them surface into my awareness only a little bit at a time, because they were so devastating.

My father would often go out in the evening and not come home until late. My mother, I guess to punish him,

would lock him out of their bedroom on those nights. He was supposed to sleep on the couch, but after a while, he

started coming into my bed. He both cajoled and threatened me never to tell, and I never did because my shame was

so great. I was sure that what was happening between us was my fault. Ours was a family where sexual issues were

never discussed, but somehow the general attitude that sex was dirty was still communicated. I certainly felt dirty,

and I didn't want anyone to know.

I got a job when I was fifteen, working nights, weekends, and summers. I stayed away from home as much as I

could, and I bought a lock for my door. The first time I locked my father out, he stood there, pounding on my door. I

pretended not to know what was happening, and my mother woke up and asked him what he was doing. He actually

said, "Ruth's got her door locked!" and my mother said, "So? Go to sleep!" That was the end of it. No questions

from my mother. No more visits from my father.

It had taken every ounce of courage I had to put a lock on my door. I was afraid it wouldn't work and that my

father would get in and be angry that I'd tried to lock him out. But even more so, I was almost willing to go on the

same way, rather than run the risk of anyone finding out what had been going on.

I left home for college at seventeen and met the man to whom I became engaged at eighteen. I was sharing an

apartment with two other girls, and one night they had some friends over whom I didn't know. I went to bed early,

mostly to avoid the pot-smoking scene that was developing. Though practically all the students flouted the school's

very strict rules about drinking and drugs, I never did get used to being around it or doing it. Anyway, my bedroom

door was right next to the bathroom door, and both were at the end of a long hallway. One of the guys at the party

who was looking for the bathroom came into my room by mistake. When he saw what he had done, instead of

leaving he asked if he could talk to me. I couldn't say no. It's hard to explain that, but I just couldn't. Well, he sat on

the side of my bed and talked to me. Then he told me to turn over and he would give me a back rub. Pretty soon he

was in my bed making love to me. And that was how I ended up engaged to him. Whether he smoked pot or not, I

think he was nearly as conservative as I was and believed as I did that having sex together meant we had to stay

together. We saw each other for about four months until, as I say, he just drifted away. I met Sam a little over a year

later. Then I assumed, because he and I never talked about sex, that we were avoiding it because of our religious

convictions. I didn't recognize we were avoiding it because we were both so sexually damaged. I liked the feeling of

helping Sam, of working hard with him to overcome our problem for the sake of my becoming pregnant. I liked

feeling helpful, understanding, patient—and in control. Anything less than that total control would have stirred up

all those old feelings of my father approaching me and fondling me through all those nights and all those years.

When what had happened between my father and myself began to surface in therapy, my therapist strongly urged

me to attend meetings of Daughters United, a self-help group of daughters whose fathers have sexually abused them.

I resisted for a long time but finally got involved. It was really a blessing that I did. To learn that there were so many

other women who had experiences similar to and often much worse than mine was reassuring and healing. Several

of these women had also married men who had sexual problems of their own. These men formed a self-help group,

too, and somehow Sam got the courage to join them.

Sam's parents had been obsessed with raising him to be, in their words, a "pure, clean boy." If he had his hands in

his lap at the dinner table, he was ordered to keep them on the table “where we can see what you’re doing.” If he

was in the bathroom too long, they would pound on the door and shout, “What are you doing in there?” It was

constant. They searched his drawers for magazines and his clothing for stains. He became so afraid of having any

sexual feeling or experience that, ultimately, he couldn’t even if he tried.

As we began to get better, in some ways life became more difficult for us as a couple. I still had a tremendous

need to control Sam’s every expression of sexuality (just as his parents had done), because any sexual

aggressiveness on his part was so threatening to me. If he reached for me spontaneously I would flinch, or I would

turn over or walk away or start talking or do something else to avoid his advances. I couldn’t bear having him lean

over me when I was in bed because it reminded me so much of the way my father had approached me. But his

recovery required that he become fully in charge of his body and his feelings. I had to stop controlling him so that he

could, literally, experience his own potency. And yet my fear of being overwhelmed was a big problem, too. I

learned to say, “I’m getting scared now,” and Sam would answer, “What do you need me to do?” Usually that was

enough—just to know that he cared about my feelings and would listen to me.

We worked out this deal where we would take turns being in charge of what happened between us sexually.

Either of us could say no to anything we didn't like or didn't want to do, but basically one of us would orchestrate

the whole encounter. That was one of the best ideas we ever had, because it addressed the need each of us had to be

in charge of our own bodies and what we did with them sexually. We really learned to trust each other and to believe

that we could give and receive love with our bodies. We also had our groups for support. Everyone's problems and

feelings were so similar that it really helped to keep our struggles in perspective. One night our two groups met

together and we spent the evening discussing our personal reactions to the words impotent and frigid. There were

tears and laughter and so much understanding and sharing. It took a lot of the shame and the pain away for all of us.

Maybe because Sam and I had already shared so much by that time and there was so much trust, the sexual part of

our relationship began to work. We have two beautiful daughters now and we're so happy with them, with

ourselves, and with each other. I'm much less of a mother to Sam and much more of a partner. He's less passive and

more assertive. He doesn't need me to keep the secret of his impotence from the world, and I don't need him to be

asexual. We have lots of choices now, and we freely choose each other!

Ruth's story illustrates another facet of how denial and the need for control manifest themselves. Like so many

women who become obsessed with their partner's problems, Ruth knew before her marriage to Sam exactly what his

problems were. She was therefore not surprised at their inability to perform sexually together. In fact, that failure

was something of a guarantee that she wouldn't ever have to feel out of control of her own sexuality again. She

could be the initiator, the one in control, rather than what was for her the only other role in sex—the victim.

Again, this couple was fortunate in that the help they received was tailor-made for their problems. For her the

appropriate support group was Daughters United, an offshoot of Parents United, formed to help promote recovery in

families where incest has occurred. Luckily, a corresponding group had been formed by the husbands of these incest

victims, and in this climate of understanding, acceptance, and shared experience, each of these damaged people

could move cautiously toward healthy sexual expression.

For each of the women in this chapter, recovery demanded that she face the pain, past and present, that she had

attempted to avoid. As a child, each had developed a style for surviving that included practicing denial and

attempting to gain control. Later, in adulthood, those styles ill-served these women. In fact, their defenses had

become major contributors to their pain.

For the woman who loves too much, the practice of denial, magnanimously rephrased as “overlooking his faults”

or “keeping a positive attitude,” conveniently sidesteps the two-to-tango aspect of how his shortcomings allow her to

practice her familiar roles. When her drive to control masquerades as “being helpful” and “giving encouragement,”

what is ignored again is her own need for the superiority and power implied in this kind of interaction.

We need to recognize that the practice of denial and control, called by whatever names, does not ultimately

enhance our lives or our relationships. Rather, the mechanism of denial leads us into relationships that allow for the

compulsive reenactment of our old struggles, and the need to control keeps us there, striving to change someone else

rather than ourselves.

Now to return to the fairy tale highlighted at the beginning of the chapter. As noted before, the tale “Beauty and

the Beast” would appear to be a vehicle for perpetuating the belief that a woman has the power to transform a man if

she will only love him devotedly. At this level of interpretation, the tale seems to advocate both denial and control as

methods for achieving happiness. Beauty, by loving the fearful monster unquestioningly (denial), appears to have

the power to change (control) him. This interpretation seems accurate, because it fits in with the sexual roles our

culture dictates. Nonetheless, I suggest that such a simplistic interpretation widely misses the significance of this

time-honored fairy tale. That this story endures is not because it reinforces any era's cultural precepts and

stereotypes. It endures because it embodies a profound metaphysical law, a vital lesson in how to live our lives

wisely and well. It is as if the story contains a secret map, which, if we are but clever enough to decipher it and

courageous enough to follow it, will lead us to a rich cache of treasure—our own “happily ever after.”

So what, then, is the point of “Beauty and the Beast?” It is *acceptance*. Acceptance is the antithesis of denial and

control. It is a willingness to recognize what reality is and to allow that reality to be, without a need to change it.

Therein lies a happiness that issues not from manipulating outside conditions or people, but from developing inner

peace, even in the face of challenges and difficulties.

Remember, in the fairy tale, Beauty had no need for the Beast to change. She appraised him realistically, accepted

him for what he was, and appreciated him for his good qualities. She did not try to make a prince out of a monster.

She did not say, “I’ll be happy when he’s not an animal anymore.” She did not pity him for being what he was or try

to change him. And therein lies the lesson. Because of her attitude of acceptance, he was freed to become his own

best self. That his true self just happened to be a handsome prince (and perfect partner for her) demonstrates

symbolically that she was rewarded greatly when she practiced acceptance. Her reward was a rich and fulfilling life,

signified by living happily ever after with the prince.

True acceptance of an individual as he is, without trying to change him through encouragement or manipulation

or coercion, is a very high form of love, and very difficult for most of us to practice. At the bottom of all our efforts

to change someone else is a basically selfish motive, a belief that through his changing we will become happy. There

is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy, but to place the source of that happiness outside ourselves, in someone

else's hands, means we avoid our ability and responsibility to change our own life for the better.

Ironically, it is this very practice of acceptance that allows another to change if he chooses to do so. Let's look at

how this works. If a woman's partner has a problem with workaholism, for instance, and she pleads and argues with

him about the long hours he spends away from home, what is the usual result? He spends just as much or more time

away from her, feeling justified that he has a right to do so in order to escape her endless laments. In other words, by

scolding and pleading and trying to change him, she actually enables him to believe that the problem between them

is not his workaholism but her nagging—and indeed, her compulsion to change him may become as large a

contributing factor to the emotional distance between them as his compulsion to work. In her efforts to force him to

be closer to her, she is actually pushing him further away.

Workaholism is a serious disorder, as are all compulsive behaviors. It serves a purpose in her husband's life,

probably protecting him from experiencing the closeness and intimacy he fears, and forestalling the upwelling of

various uncomfortable emotions, primarily anxiety and despair. (Workaholism is one of the means of avoiding

oneself that men from dysfunctional families frequently employ, just as loving too much is one of the primary means

of avoidance employed by women from these kinds of families.) The price he pays for this avoidance is a one-

dimensional existence that precludes his enjoying much of what life has to offer. But only he can decide if the price

is too high, and only he can choose to take whatever measures and risks are required for him to change. His wife's

task is not to straighten out his life but to enhance her own.

Most of us have the ability to be far happier and more fulfilled as individuals than we realize. Often, we don't

claim that happiness because we believe someone else's behavior is preventing us from doing so. We ignore our

obligation to develop ourselves while we scheme and maneuver and manipulate to change someone else, and we

become angry and discouraged and depressed when our efforts fail. Trying to change someone else is frustrating and

depressing, but exercising the power we have to effect change in our own life is exhilarating.

For the wife of a workaholic to be free to live a fulfilling life of her own, no matter what her husband does, she

must come to believe that his problem is not her problem, and that it is not within her power, her duty, or her right to

change him. She must learn to respect his right to be who he is, even though she wishes he were different.

When she does so, she is free—free of resentment for his unavailability, free of guilt for not being able to change

him, free of the burden of trying and trying to change that which she cannot. With less resentment and guilt she may

begin to feel greater affection toward him for the qualities in him that she does appreciate.

When she lets go of trying to change him and redirects her energy to developing her own interests, she will

experience some measure of happiness and satisfaction, no matter what he does. She may eventually discover that

her pursuits are fulfilling enough so that she can enjoy a rich and rewarding life on her own, without much

companionship from her husband. Or, as she becomes less and less dependent on him for her happiness, she may

decide that her commitment to an absent partner is pointless and may choose to get on with her life free of the

constraint of an unrewarding marriage. Neither of these paths is possible as long as she needs him to change in order

for her to be happy. Until she accepts him as he is, she is frozen in suspended animation, waiting for him to change

before she can begin to live her life.

When a woman who loves too much gives up her crusade to change the man in her life, he is then left to ponder

the consequences of his own behavior. Since she is no longer frustrated and unhappy, but rather is becoming more

and more excited about life, the contrast to his own existence intensifies. He may choose to struggle with

disengaging from his obsession and becoming more physically and emotionally available. Or he may not. But no

matter what he chooses to do, by accepting the man in her life exactly as he is, a woman becomes free, one way or

another, to live her own life—happily ever after.

8

When One Addiction Feeds Another

There is a great deal of pain in life and perhaps the only pain that can be avoided is the pain that comes from trying to avoid pain.

—R. D. Laing

At our worst we women who love too much are relationship addicts, “man junkies” strung out on pain, fear, and

yearning. As if this weren’t bad enough, men may not be the only thing we’re hooked on. In order to block our

deepest feelings from childhood, some of us have also developed dependencies on addictive substances. In our

youth or later in adulthood we may have begun abusing alcohol or other drugs or, most typically for women who

love too much, food. We have overeaten or undereaten or both in order to tune out reality, distract ourselves, and

numb the vast emotional emptiness deep inside us.

Not every woman who loves too much also eats too much or drinks too much or uses too many drugs, but for

those of us who do, our recovery from relationship addiction must go hand in hand with our recovery from addiction

to whatever substance we abuse. Here's why: The more we depend on alcohol, drugs, or food, the more guilt,

shame, fear, and self-hate we feel. Increasingly lonely and isolated, we may become desperate for the reassurance a

relationship with a man seems to promise. Because we feel terrible about ourselves, we want a man to make us feel

better. Because we can't love ourselves, we need him to convince us that we are lovable. We even tell ourselves that

with the right man we won't need so much food or alcohol or so many drugs. We use relationships in the same way

that we use our addictive substance: to take our pain away. When a relationship fails us, we turn even more

frantically to the substance we've abused, again looking for relief. A vicious cycle is created when physical

dependence on a substance is exacerbated by the stress of an unhealthy relationship, and emotional dependence on a

relationship is intensified by the chaotic feelings engendered by physical addiction. We use being without a man or

being with the wrong man to explain and excuse our physical addiction. Conversely, our continued use of the

addictive substance allows us to tolerate our unhealthy relationship by numbing our pain and robbing us of the

motivation necessary for change. We blame one for the other. We use one to deal with the other. And we become

more and more hooked on both.

As long as we are bent on escaping ourselves and avoiding our pain, we stay sick. The harder we try and the more

avenues of escape we pursue, the sicker we get as we compound addictions with obsessions. We eventually discover

that our solutions have become our most serious problems. Badly needing relief and finding none, sometimes we can

begin to get a little crazy.

“I’m here because my attorney sent me.” Brenda was nearly whispering as she made this confession on the occasion

of our first appointment. “I ... I ... well, took some things and got caught, and he thought it would be a good idea for

me to see someone for counseling ...,” she continued conspiratorially, “that it would look better when I go back to

court, if they think I’m getting help with my problems.”

I barely had time to nod before she rushed on. “Except, well, I don’t think I really have any *problems*. I took a

couple of things from this little drugstore and forgot to pay for them. That’s pretty awful, having them think I stole

from them, but really it was just an oversight. The worst thing about all this is the embarrassment. But I don’t have

any *real* problems, not like some people do.”

Brenda was presenting one of the most difficult challenges in counseling: a client who is not motivated enough to

seek help for herself, indeed who denies needing any help, yet is there in the office, referred by someone else who

thinks counseling would be beneficial.

While she chatted on breathlessly, I found myself tuning out the words rushing at me. Instead, I studied the

woman herself. She was tall, at least five foot ten, and fashion-model thin, weighing at the most 115 pounds. She

wore an elegantly simple silk dress of deep coral, accented with heavy ivory-and-gold jewelry. With her honey-

blond hair and sea-green eyes she should have been beautiful. The ingredients were all there, but something was off,

something was missing. Her brows were chronically knitted, creating a deep vertical crease between them. She held

her breath a lot, nostrils constantly flared. And her hair, though carefully cut and coiffed, was dry and brittle. Her

skin was papery and sallow in spite of an attractive tan. Her mouth would have been wide and full, but she

constantly pursed her lips together, making them appear thin and tight. When she smiled it was as though she was

carefully drawing a curtain back across her teeth, and when she spoke she did so with much lip-biting. I began to

suspect that she practiced self-induced vomiting along with binge-eating (bulimia) and/ or self-starvation (anorexia),

because of the quality of her skin and hair as well as her extreme thinness.

Women with eating disorders also very frequently have episodes of compulsive stealing, so that was another clue.

I also strongly suspected that she was a co-alcoholic. In my practice, nearly every woman I have seen with an eating

disorder has been the daughter of either one alcoholic, two alcoholics (especially those women who practice

bulimia) or an alcoholic and a compulsive eater. Compulsive eaters and alcoholics very frequently marry each other,

which is not surprising since so many compulsive eaters are daughters of alcoholics and daughters of alcoholics tend

to marry alcoholics. The compulsive eater is determined to control her food, her body, and her partner through the

force of her will. Brenda and I certainly had some work ahead of us.

“Tell me about yourself,” I requested as gently as I could, even though I knew what was coming.

Sure enough, most of what she proceeded to tell me that first day were lies: she was fine, she was happy, she

didn't know what happened in the store, she couldn't remember it at all, she'd never taken anything else before. She

went on to say that her attorney was very nice, just as I obviously was, and that she didn't want anyone else to know

about this incident because no one else would understand, the way the attorney and I did. The flattery was calculated

to get me to collude with her that nothing was really wrong, to support her in her myth that the arrest was a mistake,

an inconvenient little quirk of fate and nothing more.

Fortunately, there was quite a bit of time between the first appointment and when her case was finally adjudicated,

and since she knew I was in contact with her attorney she kept trying to be a "good client." She kept every

appointment, and after a while she slowly began to be more truthful almost in spite of herself. Thankfully, when that

happened she experienced the relief that came from letting go of living a lie. Soon she was in therapy at least as

much for herself as for the effect it might have on a judge hearing the case. By the time she was sentenced (six

months suspended and full restitution, plus forty hours of community work that she served at the local Girls' Club)

she was working as hard to become truthful as she had. previously worked to cover up who she was and what she

did.

Brenda's real story, which she at first very hesitantly and cautiously disclosed, began to emerge during our third

session. She looked very tired and drawn, and when I commented on this she admitted having had trouble sleeping

that week. What had happened to cause that, I queried her.

First she blamed it on the upcoming trial, but that explanation didn't ring entirely true, so I probed. "Is there

anything else that's troubling you this week?"

She waited awhile, determinedly chewing her lips, working her way systematically from top lip to bottom and

back. Then she fairly blurted out, "I asked my husband to leave, finally, and now I wish I hadn't. I can't sleep, I

can't work, I'm a nervous wreck. I hated what he was doing, running around so obviously with that girl from work,

but getting along without him is harder than putting up with all of that. Now I don't know which way to turn, and I

wonder if it wasn't all my fault anyway. He always said it was, that I was too cold and distant, not enough of a

woman for him. And I guess he was right. I was angry and withdrawn a lot, but it was because he criticized me so

much. I kept telling him, 'If you want me to be warm toward you, then you have to treat me as though you like me

and say nice things to me, instead of telling me how awful or dumb or unattractive I am.'" Then she immediately

became frightened, those eyebrows climbing even higher up her forehead, and she began discounting everything she

had just disclosed. Waving manicured hands, she disclaimed, 'We're not really separated, just taking time off from

each other for a while. And Rudy isn't that critical, really, I guess I deserve it. Sometimes I'm tired when I come

home from work, and I don't want to cook, especially because he doesn't like what I cook. He likes his mother's

cooking so much better that he'll leave the table for his mother's house and then not get home again until two in the

morning. I just don't feel like trying so hard to make him happy when it never works anyway. But it's not that bad.

Lots of women have it worse."

"What does he do until two? He can't be at his mother's all that time," I questioned.

"I don't even want to know. I guess he's out with his girlfriend. But I don't care. I like it better when he leaves me

alone. Lots of times he wants to fight when he finally does get home, and it was more because of that—making me

so tired for work the next day—than his carrying on that finally made me ask him to leave."

Here was a woman determined not to feel or reveal her emotions. That they were fairly screaming to make

themselves heard only stirred her to create more predicaments in her life in order to drown them out.

After our third session I called her attorney and told him to carefully reiterate to Brenda how important it was that

she continue in counseling with me. I was going to take a chance with her and I didn't want to lose her. At the

beginning of our fourth session I waded in.

"Tell me about you and food, Brenda," I asked as kindly as I could. Her green eyes widened in alarm, her swallow

skin lost even more color, and she pulled back visibly. Then those eyes narrowed and she smiled disarmingly.

“What do you mean, me and food? That’s a silly question!”

I told her what it was I saw in her appearance that had alerted me and talked to her about the etiology of eating

disorders. Identifying it as a disease shared by many, many women helped Brenda put her own compulsive behavior

in better perspective. It didn’t take as long as I’d feared to get her talking.

Brenda’s story was long and complicated, and it took quite a while for her to sort out reality from her need to

distort, cover up, and pretend. She’d gotten so proficient at dissembling that she’d become caught in her own web of

lies. She had worked hard to perfect an image to present to the outside world, an image that would mask her fear,

loneliness, and the terrible emptiness inside. It was very hard for her to assess her situation so that she could take

steps to meet her own needs. And her neediness was why she stole compulsively, ate compulsively, vomited and ate

again, and lied compulsively, desperately trying to cover her every move.

Brenda’s mother had also been a compulsive eater, grossly overweight as far back as Brenda could remember.

Her father, a thin, wiry, energetic man, long since turned off by both his wife’s appearance and her eccentric

religiosity, had openly flouted his marriage vows for years. No one in the family doubted that he was unfaithful, and

no one ever talked about it. Knowing it was one thing but admitting it was another, a violation of the family's tacit

agreement: what we don't acknowledge out loud doesn't exist for us as a family, and therefore can't hurt us. It was a

rule Brenda rigorously applied to her own life. If she didn't admit that anything was wrong, then nothing was.

Problems didn't exist unless she put them into words. No wonder she tenaciously clung to the very lies and

fabrications that were destroying her. And no wonder being in therapy was so hard for her.

Brenda grew up thin, wiry like her dad, and immensely relieved that she could eat a lot yet not get fat like her

mother. At the age of fifteen her body began to suddenly show the effects of the enormous amounts of food she ate.

By the time she was eighteen she weighed 240 pounds, and was more desperately unhappy than she'd ever been.

Daddy now said unkind things to this young woman who had been his favorite child, about how she was turning out

to be just like her mother after all. True, he wouldn't have said those things if he hadn't been drinking, but the fact

was he was drinking most of the time now, even when he was home, which was seldom. Mom kept on praying and

praising the Lord, and Dad kept on drinking and running around, and Brenda kept on eating, trying not to feel the

panic rising within her.

When she was away from home for the first time as a college student, and terribly lonely for the comfort of the

same mother and father she also deplored, she made an incredible discovery. Alone in her room, in the middle of a

binge, she realized that she could vomit up nearly everything she'd eaten, and not be penalized for her enormous

consumption of food by gaining weight. She was soon so entranced by the control she now felt over her weight that

she began to fast, and to vomit whatever she did eat. She was moving from the bulimic stage to the anorexic stage of

her compulsive eating disorder.

Brenda had repeated bouts of obesity interspersed with periods of extreme thinness over the next several years.

What she never experienced during that time was a single day free from her obsession with food. She woke with

hope each morning that today would be different from yesterday, and she went to bed each night with resolve to be

“normal” tomorrow, often to wake in the middle of the night primed for another binge. Brenda had no real

understanding of what was happening to her. She did not know that she had an eating disorder, so often present in

daughters of alcoholics as well as in children of compulsive eaters. She didn't understand that she and her mother

were both suffering from an allergy-addiction to certain foods, principally refined carbohydrates, which almost

exactly paralleled her father's allergy-addiction to alcohol. None of them could safely ingest the smallest bit of their

addictive substance without setting off an intense craving for more and more and more. And like her father's

relationship to alcohol, Brenda's relationship to food, and especially to sugary baked goods, consisted of one long,

drawn-out battle to control the substance that instead controlled her.

She continued to practice self-induced vomiting for years after the time she first "invented" it in college. Her

isolation and secretiveness became ever more involved and extreme, and in many ways this behavior was fostered

by her family as well as by her disease. Brenda's family did not want to hear anything from her to which they

couldn't reply, "Oh, that's nice, dear." There was no room for pain, fear, loneliness, honesty, no room for the truth

about herself or her life. Because they constantly skirted the truth, it was implicit that she should, too, and not rock

the boat. With her parents as silent accomplices, she dived deeper into the lie that was her life, sure that if she could

manage to look good on the outside, all would be well—or at least stilled—on the inside.

Even when her appearance was under control for extended periods, the turmoil within could not be ignored.

Though she did everything she could to make the outside look good—designer clothes worn with the latest makeup

and hairstyles—it wasn't enough to still her fear, fill her emptiness. Partly because of all the emotions she refused to

recognize and partly because of the devastation to her nervous system that her self-imposed malnutrition was

producing, Brenda's mental state was confused, anxious, morbid, and obsessive.

In a search for freedom from this inner turmoil, Brenda, following her mother's pattern, sought solace in a zealous

religious group that met on campus. It was within this circle that in her senior year she met her husband-to-be, Rudy,

a kind of dark-horse type who fascinated her all the more because of his mystery. Brenda was used to secrets, and he

had plenty. There were hints in the stories he told and the names he dropped that he had been on the fringes of mob

activities involving bookmaking and numbers in the New Jersey city that was his hometown. He vaguely alluded to

large amounts of money he had made and spent, flashy cars and flashy women, the night-clubs, the drinking and

drugs. And here he was now, metamorphosed into a serious student living on the campus of a staid midwestern

college, active in a religious group for young people, having left his shadowy past behind in search of something

better. That he had left in a hurry and under duress was implied by the fact that he had even broken off

communication with his family, but Brenda was so impressed with both his dark, mysterious past and his apparently

sincere attempts to change that she had no need to ask for detailed explanations of his past exploits. After all, she

had her own secrets to keep.

So these two people pretending to be what they were not, he an outlaw in the guise of a choirboy, she a

compulsive eater masquerading as a fashion plate, naturally fell in love—with each other's projected illusion. That

someone loved what she pretended to be sealed Brenda's fate. Now she had to keep the deception going, and at

closer quarters. More pressure, more stress, more need to eat, vomit, hide.

Rudy's abstinence from cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs lasted until he heard from his family that they had moved to

California. Apparently deciding that with enough geographical distance between him and his past he could safely

return both to his family and his old ways, he packed up himself and his new wife Brenda and headed west. Almost

as soon as he crossed the first state line his persona began to alter, to revert to what it had been before Brenda met

him. Her camouflage lasted longer, until she and Rudy began living with his parents. With so many people in the

house, she was unable to freely continue her self-induced vomiting. While the binges were harder to hide, they

nevertheless gained momentum under the stress of her present circumstances, and Brenda's weight began to climb.

She quickly gained fifty pounds, and Rudy's beautiful blond wife disappeared into the matronly folds of Brenda's

relentlessly fattening body. Feeling cheated and angry, Rudy left her at home while he went out drinking, and

looking for someone whose appearance complemented his the way Brenda's once had. In despair, she ate more than

ever, promising herself and Rudy that all she needed was for them to have a place of their own and she would be

able to become slim again. When they finally got their town house, sure enough, Brenda's weight began to drop as

precipitously as it had risen, but Rudy was rarely home to notice. She became pregnant, and four months later she

miscarried alone while Rudy spent the night elsewhere.

By now Brenda was sure that everything happening was her fault. The man who had once been wholesome and

happy and had shared her values and beliefs was like another person now, someone she didn't know and didn't like.

They argued over his behavior and her nagging. She tried not to nag, hoping his behavior would change. It didn't.

She wasn't fat like her mother, and yet he ran around like her father. Her helplessness in getting her life in order

panicked her.

Brenda had stolen as a teenager, not with friends in a shared assault on the adult world's booty, but alone, in

secret, rarely ever using or even keeping the items she took. Now in her unhappy marriage to Rudy, she began to

steal again, symbolically taking from the world what wasn't being given to her: love, support, understanding, and

acceptance. But her thievery only isolated her more, gave her another dark secret to guard, another source of shame

and guilt. Meanwhile, the outside packaging was again becoming Brenda's greatest defense against being seen for

what she was—a driven, fearful, empty, and lonely person. Once more she was thin, and she held a job primarily to

keep herself supplied with the expensive clothes she craved. She modeled some, and hoped it would make Rudy

proud of her. While he bragged about his wife, the model, he never bothered actually coming to watch her walk

down a single runway.

Because Brenda looked to Rudy for appreciation and validation, his inability to give these drove her self-esteem,

already so marginal, even lower. The less he gave her, the more she needed from him. She worked on perfecting her

appearance, but felt that she was missing some mysteriously attractive element the dark-haired women with whom

Rudy had his affairs all seemed to effortlessly exude. She pushed herself harder to be thinner, because being thinner

meant being more perfect. She became a perfectionist about housekeeping as well, and soon was totally occupied

with her various obsessive-compulsive behaviors : cleaning, stealing, eating, vomiting. While Rudy was out

drinking and running around, Brenda was cleaning the house late into the night, guiltily hopping into bed and

feigning sleep if she heard his car pull into the garage below.

Rudy complained about her fastidiousness around the house, and rather aggressively undid the effects of her

careful cleaning each evening when he came home, whether early or late. The result was that Brenda couldn't wait

for him to leave so that she could clean and straighten what he'd messed up. When he left for the evening's drinking

and carousing, she felt relief. Everything was getting crazier.

Her arrest in the drugstore was doubtless a blessing, in that it created a crisis that got her into counseling, where

she started looking at what her life had become. She had wanted to get away from Rudy for a long time but hadn't

been able to let go of her compulsion to fix the relationship by perfecting herself. Ironically, the more completely

she separated from him, the more ardently he pursued her, with flowers, phone calls, showing up at her workplace

unexpectedly with tickets to a concert. Her coworkers, who first met him while he was playing this role, thought

Brenda was foolish to leave such an adoring, devoted man. It took two hope-filled reconciliations, each followed by

painful breakups, for her to learn that Rudy wanted only what he couldn't have. Once they lived together as man and

wife, his womanizing quickly resumed. During the second breakup Brenda told him she thought he had a problem

with drinking and drugs. He set about getting help to prove he didn't. For two months he was clean and sober. They

reconciled again, and on the occasion of their first argument a few days later he drank and stayed out all night. When

this happened, Brenda, with the help of therapy, saw the pattern in which they both were caught. Rudy was using the

deliberately created turbulence of his relationship with Brenda to both camouflage and justify his addictive pursuit

of alcohol, drugs, and women. At the same time, Brenda was using the tremendous tension generated by their

relationship as an excuse for surrendering to and indulging in her bulimia and other compulsive behaviors. Each

used the other to avoid dealing with themselves and their own addictions. When Brenda finally recognized this, she

was able to let go of the hope that she could have a happy marriage.

Brenda's recovery involved three very important and necessary elements. She stayed in therapy, she attended Al-

Anon to deal with her lifelong co-alcoholism, and she finally, with the relief that comes from surrender, immersed

herself in Overeaters Anonymous, where she received help and support in dealing with her eating disorder. For

Brenda, involvement in O.A. was the most important factor in her recovery, and the one she had resisted most

vigorously in the beginning. Her compulsive eating, vomiting, and starving comprised her most serious and deep-

seated problem, her primary disease process. The obsession with food drained off all the energy that would be

required for her to achieve any kind of healthy relationship with herself and others in her life. Until she was able to

stop obsessing about her weight, her food intake, calories, diets, and so on, she could feel no real emotions about

anything but food, nor could she be honest with herself or others.

As long as her feelings were numbed by her eating disorder, she could not begin to take care of herself, make wise

decisions for herself, or really live her own life. Instead, food was her life, and in many ways that was the only life

she wanted. Desperate as her battle was to control food, it was a less threatening struggle than the one she faced with

herself, her family, her husband. Although she had set limits hourly regarding what she would and wouldn't eat,

Brenda had never set limits on what others could do or say to her. In order to recover, she had to begin to define the

point where others left off and she, an autonomous person, began. She also had to allow herself to get angry at

others, not just at herself, which had been her chronic state.

In O.A. Brenda began to practice honesty for the first time in many, many years. After all, what was the point of

lying about her behavior to people who understood and accepted who she was and what she did? In return for her

honesty came the healing power of acceptance from her peers. This gave her the courage to carry that honesty to a

wider circle outside of the O.A. program, to her family and friends and to possible partners.

Al-Anon helped her understand the roots of her problem in her family of origin and also gave her tools for

understanding both her parents' compulsive disorders as well as how their diseases had affected her. There she

learned to relate to them in a healthier way.

Rudy went on to marry again, the moment the divorce was final, even while protesting by phone the night before

his next wedding that he really wanted only Brenda. That conversation deepened Brenda's understanding of Rudy's

inability to honor the commitments he made, of his need to constantly look for a way to avoid whatever relationship

he was in. Like her father, he was a wanderer who also liked having a wife and a home.

Brenda soon learned, too, that it was necessary for her to maintain considerable distance, both geographically and

emotionally, between herself and her family. Two visits home, both of which temporarily reactivated her bingeing

and purging syndrome, taught her that she could not yet be around her family without resorting to her old ways of

handling the tension.

Staying healthy has become her first priority, but she continues to be amazed at how difficult a challenge it is and

how few skills she possesses for it. Filling her life with enjoyable work, as well as new friendships and interests, has

been a slow, step-by-step process. Having known little about being happy, comfortable, and at peace, she has had to

rigorously avoid creating problems that would enable her to feel the old, familiar craziness.

Brenda continues to attend O.A., Al-Anon, and occasionally therapy sessions when she feels the need. She is no

longer as thin as she once was, nor as fat either. "I'm normal!" she howls, enjoying a laugh on herself, knowing she

never will be. Her eating disorder is a lifelong disease that demands her respect, although it no longer has a

stranglehold on her health or her sanity.

Brenda's recovery is still a fragile thing. It takes a long time before the new, healthier ways of living feel right

instead of forced. She could again revert to avoiding herself and her feelings through compulsive eating or through

obsession with an unhealthy relationship. Because she knows this, Brenda currently interacts with men cautiously,

never making a date that would require missing an O.A. or Al-Anon meeting, for instance. Her recovery is

extremely precious to her, and she is not about to jeopardize it. In her words, "I've made it a practice - not to keep

secrets anymore, since that was how I got so sick in the first place. Now when I meet a new man, if it looks like the

relationship might go somewhere I always let him know about my disease and the importance of the Anonymous

programs in my life. If he can't handle knowing the truth about me or is unable to understand, I see it as his

problem, not mine. I'm not trying to turn myself inside out to please a man anymore. My priorities are very different

today. My recovery has to come first. Otherwise, I have nothing left to offer anyone else."

9

Dying for Love

We are all, every one of us, full of horror. If you are getting married to make yours go away, you will only succeed in marrying

your horror to someone else's horror; your two horrors will have the marriage, you will bleed and call that love.

—*Michael Ventura, "Shadow Dancing in the Marriage Zone"*

Chain-smoking, her shoulders held high and tight, Margo swung her crossed leg rapidly back and forth, with her

foot giving an extra jerk at the end of each oscillation. She sat stiffly forward and stared out the waiting-room

window at one of the most beautiful vistas in the world. The red-tiled roofs of Santa Barbara climbed the blue and

purple hills above the ocean, but the scene, softly tinted with pink and gold on that summer afternoon, lent none of

its Spanish-style tranquillity to her face. She looked like a woman in a hurry, and indeed she was.

As I pointed the way, she walked quickly, heels tapping, into my office and sat down, again on the edge of her

chair, and looked sharply at me. "How do I know you can help me? I've never done this before, come to talk with

someone about my life. How do I know it's going to be worth the time and the money?"

I knew she was also trying to ask me, "How do I know whether I can trust you to care about me if I let you know

who I really am?" So I tried to answer both questions with my reply.

"Therapy does require a commitment of time and money. But people never even come to the first appointment

unless something very frightening or very painful is happening in their lives, something they've already tried hard to

handle but haven't been able to manage. No one just casually drops in to see a therapist. I'm sure you thought about

it a long time before you decided to come."

The accuracy of that statement seemed to relieve her somewhat, and she allowed herself to sit back with a small

sigh.

"I probably should have done this fifteen years ago, or before that even, but how did I know I needed some help?

I thought I was doing fine. And in some ways I was—still am, too. I've got a good job and make pretty decent

money as an escrow officer." She stopped suddenly, and then, more reflectively, continued. "Sometimes it's as

though I have two lives. I go off to work, and I'm bright and efficient, well respected. People ask my advice and

give me lots of responsibility and I feel grown up and capable and sure of myself." She looked up at the ceiling and

swallowed to gain control of her voice. “Then I come home and my life is like one long, sort of crummy, novel. It’s

so bad that if it was a book, I wouldn’t read it. Too tacky, you know? But here I am, stuck living it. I’ve been

married four times already, and I’m only thirty-five. Only! God, I feel so old. I’m beginning to be afraid that I’m

never going to get my life together, and that time’s running out. I’m not as young as I used to be and not as pretty

either. I’m scared no one else will want me, that I’ve used up all my chances and now I’ll have to be alone always.”

The fear in her voice was matched by the worry lines etched on her brow as she expressed this. She swallowed

several times and blinked hard. “It would be difficult for me to say which marriage was the worst. They were all

such disasters, but in different ways.

“My first husband and I married when I was twenty. When I met him I knew he was wild. He ran around on me

before we got married, and he ran around on me afterward, too. I thought being married would make a difference,

but it never did. When our daughter was born I was sure that would slow him down a little, but it had just the

opposite effect. He stayed away even more. When he was home he was mean. I could handle him yelling at me, but

when he started punishing little Autumn for nothing and everything, I started to interfere. When that didn’t work, I

got us both out of there. It wasn't easy, because she was so little and I had to find work. He never paid us any kind

of support, either, and I was so afraid he'd make trouble for us that I didn't push it with the D.A.'s office or

anything. I couldn't move back home, because home was just like my marriage. My mom took a lot of abuse from

my dad, physical and verbal, and so did all of us kids. I was always running away when I was growing up. Finally I

had run away and gotten married to get out of there, so I sure wasn't going back.

"It took me two years from the time I left to get the courage to divorce my first husband. I couldn't quite let go

until I had another man. The attorney who handled my divorce ended up becoming my second husband. He was

quite a bit older than I was, and had been recently divorced himself. I don't think I was really in love with him, but I

wanted to be, and I thought that here was someone who could take care of Autumn and me. He talked a lot about

wanting to start over in his life, begin a new family with someone he could really love. I guess I was flattered that he

felt that way about me. I was married to him the day after my divorce was final. Everything was going to be all right

now, I was sure. I got Autumn into a good preschool and went back to school myself. My daughter and I spent our

afternoons together, then I'd make dinner and go back to school for night classes. Dwayne would stay home in the

evenings with Autumn, doing legal work. Then one morning when we were alone Autumn said some things to me

that made me realize that something awful, something sexual, was going on between her and Dwayne. I was also

suspecting that I was pregnant by now, but I just waited until the next day, as if everything was normal, and after

Dwayne went to work I put my daughter and everything of ours I could fit into my car, and left. I wrote him a note

telling him what Autumn had told me and warned him not to try to find us or it would come out about what he'd

done to her. I was so afraid that he would have some way of finding us and making us come back that I decided, if I

was pregnant, not to tell him, not to ever ask anything of him. I just wanted him to leave us alone.

“He did find out where we lived, of course, and sent me a letter, with no reference to Autumn at all. Instead, he

blamed me for being cold and indifferent toward him, leaving him alone while I went to school in the evenings. I felt

very guilty about that for a long time, thinking that what happened to Autumn was my fault. Here I'd thought I was

making everything safe for my daughter, when I'd only put her in a horrible situation.” A haunted expression came

over Margo's face as she remembered that time.

“Luckily, I found a room in a house with another young mother. She and I had so much in common. We'd both

married too young and had come from homes that were unhappy. Our dads were a lot alike and so were our first

husbands. She only had one ex-husband, though.” Margo shook her head and went on. “Anyway, we babysat for

each other a lot, and that enabled us each to continue with school and to go out, too. I felt more freedom than I ever

had in my life, even though it turned out I was pregnant. Dwayne still didn’t know, and I never told him. I

remembered all his lawyer stories about the ways he could make trouble for people legally, and I knew he could

make trouble for me, too. I wanted nothing to do with him ever again. Before we married that kind of talk from him

had made me think he was strong. Now it just made me afraid of him.

“Susie, my roommate, coached me through natural childbirth with my second daughter, Darla. It sounds crazy,

but that was one of the best times of my life. We were so poor, going to school, working, taking care of our babies,

buying clothes at thrift stores and food with food stamps. But we were free in our own way.” She shrugged. “Yet I

was so restless. I wanted a man in my life. I kept hoping I could find someone who would make my life turn out the

way I wanted it to. I still feel that way. That’s why I’m here. I want to learn how to find someone who will be good

for me. I haven’t done too well at that so far.”

Margo’s tense face, still pretty though painfully thin, looked at me pleadingly. Could I help her find and keep Mr.

Wonderful ? That was the question written all over it, her reason for coming to therapy.

She went on with her saga. The next player in her marital round-robin was Giorgio, who drove a white Mercedes-

Benz convertible and made his living supplying cocaine to some of the wealthiest noses in Montecito. It was a

roller-coaster ride with Giorgio from the beginning, and soon Margo couldn't distinguish between the chemistry of

the drug he so freely provided her with and the chemistry of her relationship with this dark and dangerous man.

Suddenly her life was fast and glamorous. It was also hard on her physically and emotionally. Her temper got

shorter. She scolded her children over trifles. Her frequent quarrels with Giorgio escalated into physical battles.

After complaining to her roommate endlessly about his thoughtlessness, infidelity, and illegal practices, Margo was

shocked when Susie finally gave her an ultimatum. Get over Giorgio or get out of the house. Susie wasn't going to

listen to it or watch it anymore. It wasn't good for Margo or any of the children. Margo, incensed, flew to Giorgio's

arms. He allowed her and her daughters to move into the house where he did most of his dealing, with the

understanding that the arrangement would be temporary. Shortly thereafter, he was arrested for drug sales. Before

his trial Giorgio and Margo were married, though by that time their interactions were almost always heated to the

boiling point.

The reason she gave for her third decision to marry was Giorgio's pressure on her to become his wife so that she

couldn't be required to testify against him. The temptation to testify was a distinct possibility, given the

inflammatory nature of their interactions and the persistence of the prosecutor. Once they were married, an

ungrateful Giorgio refused to have sexual relations with her because, he said, he felt trapped. The marriage was

eventually annulled, but not before Margo had met number four, a man four years her junior who had never held a

job because he had always been in school. She told herself that this serious student was just what she needed, after

her catastrophe with Giorgio, and by now she was terrified of being alone. Margo worked and supported them both,

until he left her to join a religious commune. During this fourth marriage, Margo had come into considerable money

from a relative's death, which she made available to this husband, hoping by that gesture to demonstrate her loyalty,

trust, and love for him (which he constantly questioned). He gave most of her money to the commune, and then

made it clear to Margo that he no longer wished to be married to her, and did not want her to join him there, blaming

her for the failure of their marriage because of her "worldliness."

Margo had been deeply scarred by these events, and yet she was desperately eager to meet number five, feeling

sure it would work out this time if she could just find the right man. She came into therapy haggard and hollow-

eyed, afraid that she had lost her looks and couldn't attract another man. She was totally out of touch with her

lifelong pattern of relating to impossible men, men she didn't trust or even like. Although she admitted to having

been unlucky so far in her choice of husbands, she was unaware of how her own needs had trapped her into each

marital disaster.

The picture she presented was alarming. Besides being severely underweight (her ulcers made eating a self-

imposed torture on the rare occasions when she had an appetite), Margo exhibited a number of other nervous, stress-

related symptoms. She was pale (she confirmed that she was anemic) with severely bitten nails and dry, brittle hair.

She described problems with eczema, diarrhea, and insomnia. Her blood pressure was very high for her age and her

energy level was alarmingly low.

"Sometimes it's all I can do to get myself up to go to work. I've taken all my sick leave and used it to stay home

and cry. I feel guilty crying when my children are home so it's a relief to be able to let go when they're at school. I

really don't know how much longer I can keep going on like this."

She reported that both her children were experiencing problems in school, academically and socially. At home

they fought with each other constantly, and her temper with them was quick. She still frequently resorted to using

cocaine for the “lift” she had become accustomed to getting from it during the days with Giorgio, a lift that she

could ill afford, financially or physically.

None of these factors, however, troubled Margo as much as currently being unattached. Since her teens she had

never been without a male in her life. As a child she had battled her father and as an adult she had, in one way or

another, battled every man she paired with. Alone four months now, it was only because of her miserable record so

far that she found herself as reluctant to go out looking as she was to hold still with herself.

Many women, because of oppressive economic realities, feel they need a man to support them financially, but this

was not the case with Margo. She had a well-paying job doing work she enjoyed. None of her four husbands had

financially supported her or her children. Her need for another man lay in a different direction. She was addicted to

relationships, and bad relationships at that.

In her family of origin there had been abuse of her mother, her siblings, and herself. There had been money

problems, insecurity, and suffering. The emotional strain of this kind of childhood had left deep traces on her

psyche.

To begin with, Margo suffered from a severe, underlying depression, so often present in women with similar

histories. Ironically, because of this depression, as well as the familiar roles she was able to play with each partner,

Margo was drawn to men who were impossible: abusive, unpredictable, irresponsible, or unresponsive. These

relationships would include many arguments, even violent fights, dramatic exits and reconciliations, and periods of

tense and fearful waiting in between. There could be serious problems with money or even with the law. Much

drama. Much chaos. Much excitement. Much stimulation.

Sounds exhausting, doesn't it? Of course, in the long run it is, but rather like using cocaine or any other powerful

stimulant, in the short run these relationships provide a great escape, a great diversion, and certainly a highly

effective mask for depression. It is almost impossible to experience depression when we are very excited, either

positively or negatively, because of the high levels of adrenaline being released and stimulating us. But too much

exposure to strong excitement exhausts the body's ability to respond, and the result is deeper depression than before,

this time with a physical as well as an emotional basis.[1](#) Many women like Margo, because of their emotional

histories of living with constant and/or severe episodes of stress in childhood (and also because often they may have

inherited a biochemical vulnerability to depression from an alcoholic or otherwise biochemically inefficient parent),

are basically depressives before they even begin their love relationships as teens and adults. Such women may

unconsciously seek the powerful stimulation of a difficult and dramatic relationship in order to stir their glands to

release adrenaline—an exercise similar to whipping a tired, overworked horse in order to get a few more miles out

of the poor, exhausted beast. This is why, when the strong stimulant of involvement in an unhealthy relationship is

removed, either because the relationship ends or because the man begins to recover from his problems and to relate

to her in a healthier way, a woman of this type will usually sink into depression. When she is without a man she will

either try to revive the last failed relationship or frantically search for another difficult man on whom to focus,

because she so badly needs the stimulation he will provide. Should her man begin to seriously address his own

problems in a healthier way, she suddenly may find herself yearning for someone more exciting, more stimulating,

someone who enables her to avoid facing her own feelings and problems.

Again, the parallels with drug use and withdrawal are obvious. To avoid her own feelings she is literally “fixing”

with a man, using him as her drug of escape. For recovery to occur she must gain the support to hold still and allow

the painful feelings to come. By this time both her emotions and her body need to heal. It is not an exaggeration to

compare this process to a heroin addict's quitting cold turkey. The fear, the pain, and the discomfort are

commensurate, and the temptation to resort to another man, another fix, is just as great.

A woman who uses her relationships as a drug will have fully as much denial about that fact as any chemically

addictive individual, and fully as much resistance and fear concerning letting go of her obsessive thinking and high

emotionally charged way of interacting with men. But usually, if she is gently but firmly confronted, she will at

some level recognize the power of her relationship addiction and know that she is in the grip of a pattern over which

she has lost control.

The first step in treating a woman with this problem is to help her realize that, like any addict, she is suffering

from a *disease process* that is identifiable, is progressive without treatment, and that responds well to specific

treatment. She needs to know that she is addicted to the pain and familiarity of an unrewarding relationship, and that

it is a disease afflicting many, many women, having its roots in disordered relationships in childhood.

To wait for someone like Margo to figure out on her own that she is a woman who loves too much, whose disease

is becoming progressively severe and may very well ultimately cost her life, is as inappropriate as listening to all the

typical symptoms of any other disease and then expecting the patient to guess her condition and her treatment. Even

more to the point, it is as unlikely that Margo, with her particular disease and its accompanying denial, could self-

diagnose, as it is unlikely that an equally sick alcoholic could accurately self-diagnose. Nor could either of them

hope to recover alone, or simply with the help of a doctor or therapist, because recovery requires that they stop

doing what seems to give them relief.

Therapy alone does not offer an adequately supportive alternative to the alcoholic's dependency on the drug or the

relationally addictive woman's dependency on her man. When anyone who has been practicing an addiction tries to

stop, an enormous vacuum is created in that person's life—too great a vacuum for an hour-long session with a

therapist once or twice a week to fill. Because of the tremendous anxiety generated when the dependence on the

substance or the person is interrupted, access to support, reassurance, and understanding must be constantly

available. This is best provided by peers who have been through the same painful withdrawal process themselves.

Another failure of traditional therapy in the treatment of any kind of addiction is the tendency to view the

addiction, whether to a substance or to a relationship, as only a symptom, rather than recognizing it as the primary

disease process that must be addressed first in order for therapy to continue and progress. Instead, the patient is

usually allowed to continue to practice the addictive behavior while therapy sessions are devoted to uncovering the

“reasons” for the behavior. This approach is absolutely backward and usually totally ineffective. By the time

someone is in an alcoholic situation, the basic problem is addiction to alcohol, and that is what must be addressed ;

that is, the drinking must stop before other aspects of life can begin to improve. Searching for underlying reasons for

the drinking in the hope that uncovering the “cause” will allow the alcohol abuse to stop does not work. The “cause”

for the drinking is that this patient has the disease of alcoholism. Only by dealing head-on with the alcoholism first

is there a chance of recovering.

For the woman who loves too much, her primary disease is her addiction to the pain and familiarity of an

unrewarding relationship. True, this generates from lifelong patterns reaching back into childhood, but she must first

of all deal with her patterns in the present, in order for her recovery to begin. No matter how sick or cruel or helpless

her partner is, she, along with her doctor or therapist, must understand that her every attempt to change him, help

him, control him, or blame him is a manifestation of her disease, and that she must stop these behaviors before other

areas of her life can improve. Her only legitimate work is with herself. In the next chapter we will outline the

specific steps that a relationally addictive woman must take in order to recover.

Alcoholics

obsessed with alcohol
denying extent of problem
lying to cover how much
drinking is going on
avoiding people to hide
problems with drinking
repeated attempts to control
drinking
unexplained mood swings
anger, depression, guilt
resentment
irrational acts
violence
accidents due to intoxication
self-hate/self-justification
physical illness due to abuse
of alcohol

Relationally Addictive Women

obsessed with relationship
denying extent of problem
lying to cover what is happening
in relationship
avoiding people to hide
problems with relationship
repeated attempts to control
relationship
unexplained mood swings
anger, depression, guilt
resentment
irrational acts
violence
accidents due to preoccupation
self-hate/self-justification
physical illness due to
stress-related diseases

Alcoholics	Relationally Addictive Women
admitting helplessness to control disease	admitting helplessness to control disease
ceasing to blame others for problems	ceasing to blame others for problems
focusing on self, taking responsibility for <i>own</i> actions	focusing on self, taking responsibility for <i>own</i> actions
seeking help for recovery from peers	seeking help for recovery from peers
beginning to deal with <i>own</i> feelings rather than avoiding them	beginning to deal with <i>own</i> feelings rather than avoiding them
building a circle of well friends, healthy interests	building a circle of well friends, healthy interests

The following charts describing the characteristics of practicing and recovering alcoholics and relationally

addictive women makes clear the behavioral parallels of these diseases, both in the active phase and in recovery.

What a chart cannot truly convey is just how parallel the struggle to recover is in those with either of these diseases.

It is as difficult to recover from relationship dependency (or loving too much) as it is to recover from alcoholism.

And for those suffering from either disease, that recovery can make the difference between life and death.

Characteristics of Practicing

Characteristics of Recovering

When we are seriously ill, our recovery often requires that the specific disease process from which we are

suffering be correctly identified in order that appropriate treatment be given. If we consult professionals, part of their

responsibility to us is to be familiar with the signs and symptoms of specific common diseases so that they can

diagnose our maladies and treat us accordingly, using the most effective means available.

I want to make a case for applying the disease concept to the pattern of loving too much. This is a tall order, and if

you balk at accepting this proposal, I hope you will at least see the strong analogy between a disease such as

alcoholism, which is addiction to a substance, and that which occurs in women who love too much, addicted as they

are to the men in their lives. I am thoroughly convinced that what afflicts women who love too much is not like a

disease process; it is a disease process, requiring a specific diagnosis and a specific treatment.

First let's examine what is meant, literally, by the word disease: any deviation from health with a specific and

progressive set of symptoms identifiable across the population of its victims, which may respond to specific forms

of treatment.

This definition does not demand the presence of a particular virus or microbe or other physical causative agent,

only that the victim of the disease become sicker in a recognizable and predictable fashion unique to that disease,

and that recovery may be possible after the application of certain appropriate interventions.

Nonetheless, it is a difficult concept for many in the medical profession to apply when the disease has behavioral

rather than physical manifestations in its early and middle stages. This is one of the reasons why most physicians

cannot recognize alcoholism unless the victim is in the late stages, when physical deterioration is obvious.

It is perhaps even more difficult to recognize loving too much as a disease, because the addiction is not to a

substance but to a person. The greatest barrier against recognizing it as a pathological condition requiring treatment,

however, is that physicians, counselors, and all the rest of us entertain certain deeply held beliefs about women and

love. We all tend to believe that suffering is a mark of true love, that to refuse to suffer is selfish, and that if a man

has a problem then a woman should help him change. These attitudes help perpetuate both diseases—alcoholism and

loving too much.

Both alcoholism and loving too much are subtle diseases in their early stages. By the time it is obvious that

something very destructive is in progress, the temptation is to look at and treat the physical manifestations—the

alcoholic's liver or pancreas, the relationally addictive woman's nerves or high blood pressure—without accurately

assessing the entire picture. It is vital to view these “symptoms” in the overall context of the disease processes that

have created them, and to recognize the existence of these diseases at the earliest possible time in order to halt the

continued destruction of emotional and physical health.

The parallel between the progression of the disease of alcoholism and the progression of the disease of loving too

much is clearly delineated in the following charts. Each chart demonstrates how addiction, whether to a mind-

altering chemical or to an unhappy relationship, ultimately affects every area of the addict’s life in a progressively

disastrous way. The effects proceed from the emotional to the physical realm, involving not only other individuals

(children, neighbors, friends, coworkers) but for the relationally addictive woman often other disease processes as

well, such as compulsive eating, stealing, or working. The charts also describe the parallel processes of recovery for

chemically addictive and relationally addictive persons. It bears mentioning that the chart for the progression of and

recovery from the disease of alcoholism is probably slightly more representative of what happens when the alcoholic

is a male, and the chart on relationship addiction is more representative of the disease process and recovery of a

woman, rather than a man, who loves too much. The variations due to sex are not major and perhaps can be fairly

easily imagined from viewing both charts, but it is not within the scope of this book to explore in detail those

differences. The main order of business here is to understand ever more clearly how women who love too much get

sick and how they can get well.

Remember, too, that Margo's story was not based on the chart, nor was the chart constructed to reflect her story.

She, with several partners, moved through the same progressive stages of the disease that another woman who loves

too much would with only one partner. If relationship addiction, or loving too much, is a disease similar to

alcoholism, then its stages are equally identifiable and its progression is just as predictable.

The following chapter will examine in detail the recovery side of the chart, but now let us focus briefly on the

feelings and behaviors described in the chart that indicate both the presence and the downward progression of the

disease of loving too much.

As indicated in each story presented in this book, women who love too much come from families of origin in

which they were either very lonely and isolated, or rejected, or overburdened with inappropriately heavy

responsibilities and so became overly nurturing and self-sacrificing; or else they were subjected to dangerous chaos

so that they developed an overwhelming need to control the people around them and the situations in which they

found themselves. It naturally follows that a woman who needs to nurture, control, or both will be able to do so only

with a partner who at least allows if not actually invites this kind of behavior. Inevitably, she will involve herself

with a man who is irresponsible in at least some important areas of his life because he clearly needs her help, her

nurturing, and her control. Then begins her struggle to try to change him through the power and persuasion of her

love.

It is at this early point that the later insanity of the relationship is foreshadowed as she begins to deny the reality

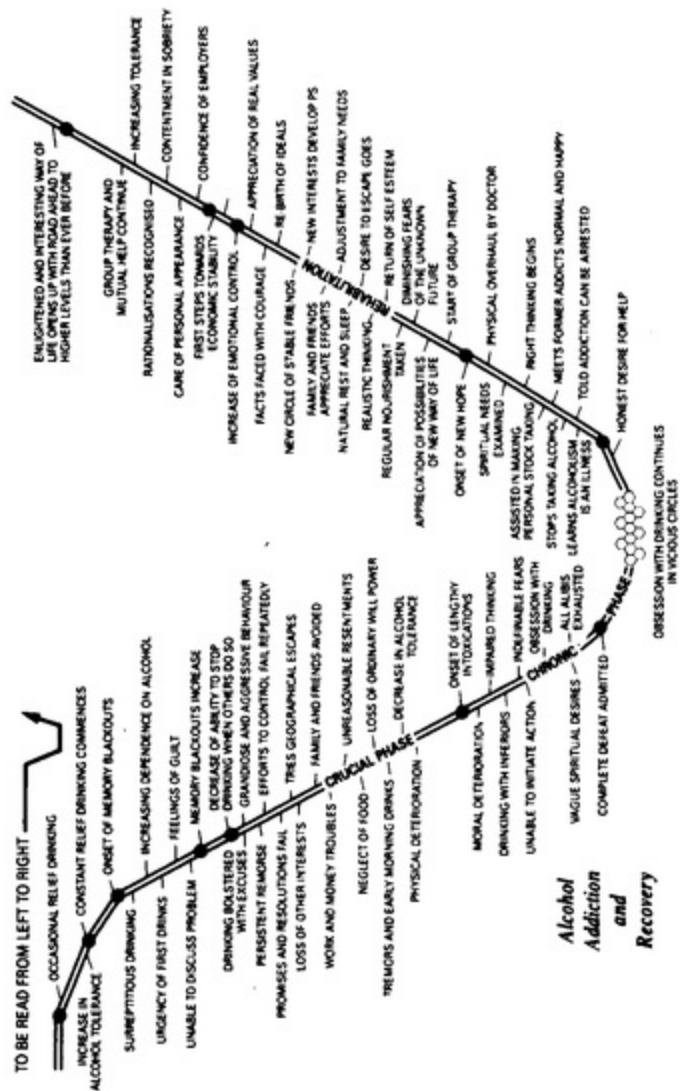
of the relationship. Remember, denial is an unconscious process, occurring automatically and unbidden. Her dream

of how it could be and her efforts to achieve that end distort her perception of how it is. Every disappointment,

failure, and betrayal in the relationship is either ignored or rationalized away. "It's not that bad." "You don't

understand what he's really like." "He didn't mean to." "It's not his fault." These are just a few of the stock phrases

that the woman who loves too much uses at this point in her disease process to defend her partner and her



relationship.

At the same time that this man is disappointing her and failing her, she is becoming more dependent on him

emotionally. This is because she has already become tightly focused on him, his problems, his welfare, and perhaps

most important, his feelings for her. As she continues to try to change him he absorbs most of her energy. He soon

becomes the source of all good things in her life. If being with him doesn't feel good, she tries to fix him or herself

so that it does. She does not look elsewhere for emotional gratification. She is too busy trying to make it work

between them. She is sure that if she can make him happy he will treat her better, and then she will be happy, too. In

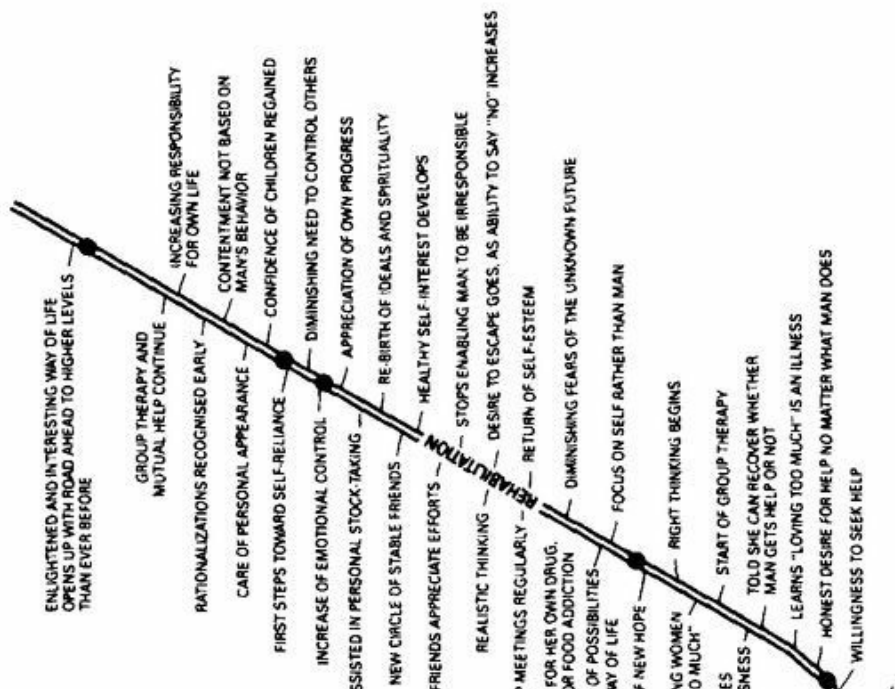
her efforts to please she becomes the careful guardian of his well-being. Each time he is upset, she takes his reaction

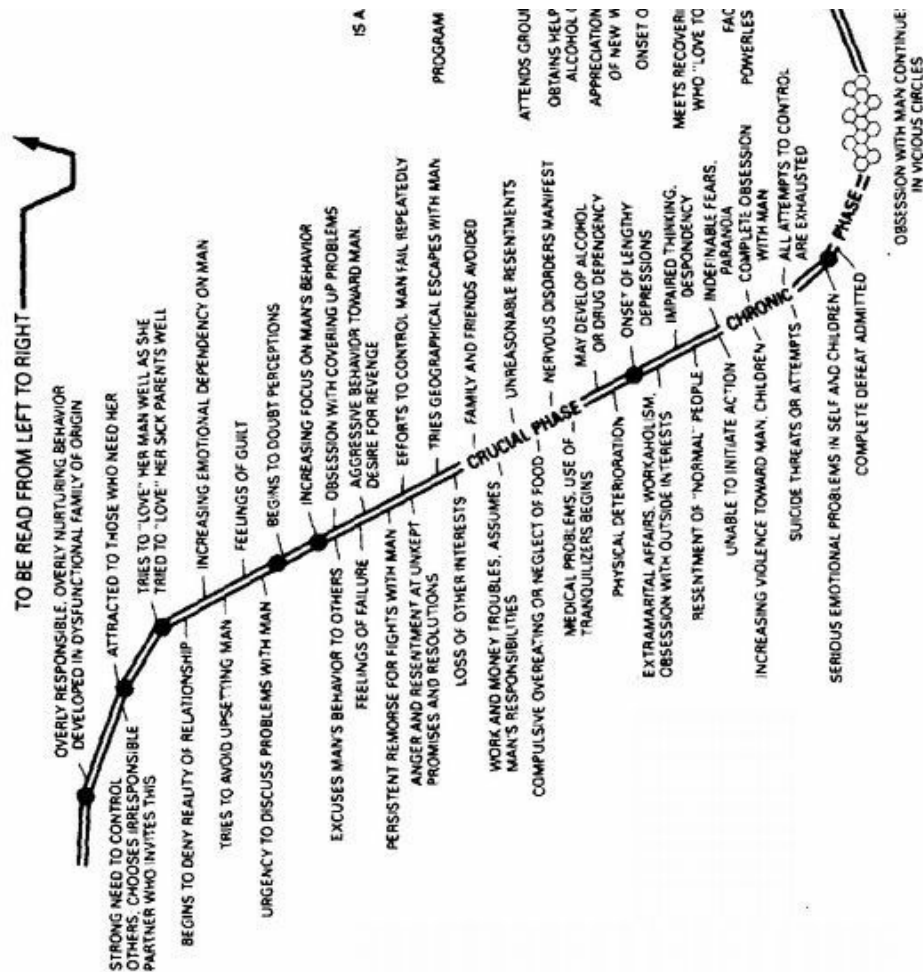
as her failure and feels guilty—for his unhappiness that she hasn't been able to ameliorate, for his inadequacies that

she hasn't been able to rectify. But perhaps most of all she feels guilty for being unhappy herself. Her denial tells her

that there is nothing really wrong with him, so the fault must be all hers.

Source: M. M. Glatt, M.D., D.P.M.. *The British Journal of Addiction* S4 no 2





Source: Adapted from M. M. Glatt, M D . D.P.M.

In her despair, which she judges as founded on trivial problems and petty complaints, she begins to need very

badly to talk things over with her partner. Long discussions ensue (if he will talk with her), but the real problems are

not usually addressed. If he is drinking too much her denial prevents her from recognizing this, and she pleads with

him to tell her why he's so unhappy, assuming his drinking is not important but his unhappiness certainly is. If he is

being unfaithful she asks why she isn't enough of a woman for him, accepting the situation as her fault, not his. And

so on.

Things are getting worse. But because her partner fears that she may become discouraged and pull away from him

and he needs her support—emotional, financial, social, or practical—he tells her she's wrong, that she's imagining

things, that he loves her and that their situation is improving but she is too negative to see it. And she believes him,

because she needs to so much. She accepts his view that she is exaggerating their problems and becomes further

removed from reality.

He has become her barometer, her radar, her emotional gauge. And she watches him constantly. All her feelings

are generated by his behavior. At the same time that she gives him the power to rock and sway her emotionally, she

runs interference between him and the world. She tries to make him look better than he is and to make them as a

couple appear happier than they are. She rationalizes away his every failure, her every disappointment, and while

she hides the truth from the world she also hides it from herself. Unable to accept that he is what he is, and that his

problems are his, not hers, she experiences a profound sense of having failed in all her energetic attempts to change

him. Her frustration erupts in anger and there are battles, sometimes physical ones, initiated by her in her impotent

rage at what appears to be his deliberate thwarting of her best efforts on his behalf. Just as she once excused his

every failing, she now takes everything personally. She feels that she is the only one who is trying to make the

relationship work. Her guilt grows as she wonders where this rage in her is coming from and why she cannot be

lovable enough for him to want to change for her, for them.

Ever more determined to bring about the changes in him that she seeks, she is now willing to try anything. They

exchange promises. She won't nag him if he won't drink or stay out late or run around or whatever. Neither of them

is able to stick to the bargain, and she perceives dimly that she is out of control—not only of him but of herself as

well. She cannot stop fighting, scolding, wheedling, begging. Her self-respect plummets.

Perhaps they move away, thinking that friends, job, family are to blame for their problems. And perhaps things

are better for a while afterward—but only for a while. Too soon, all the old patterns reassert themselves.

By now she is so consumed with this bitter battle that there is no time or energy for anything else. If there are

children they are certainly emotionally neglected, if not neglected physically as well. Social activities come to a

standstill. There is too much acrimony and too many secrets to keep to make public appearances anything but an

ordeal. And the lack of social contact serves to isolate the woman who loves too much even further. She has lost

another vital link with reality. Her relationship has become her entire world.

Once upon a time this man's irresponsibility and neediness appealed to her. That was when she was sure she

could change him, fix him. Now she finds herself shouldering burdens that are rightfully his to carry, and while she

deeply resents him for this turn of events she also revels in the sense of control it gives her over him as she parcels

out his money and takes over total control of their children.

You will notice, if you are keeping the chart in mind, that we are well into what is termed the "crucial phase," a

time of rapid deterioration, first emotionally and then physically. The woman who has been obsessing about her

relationship may now add an eating disorder to her other problems if she hasn't one already. Looking to reward

herself for all her efforts and also attempting to muffle the anger and resentment boiling in her, she may begin to use

food as a tranquilizing drug. Or she may seriously neglect food due to ulcers or a chronically upset stomach, perhaps

combined with a martyred "I don't have time to eat" attitude. Or she may rigidly control her food to make up for the

out-of-control feelings she experiences with her life in general. The abuse of alcohol or other "recreational drugs"

may begin, and, very frequently, prescribed drugs will become part of her repertoire for coping with the untenable

situation in which she finds herself. Physicians, failing to properly diagnose her progressive disorder, may

exacerbate her condition by offering tranquilizers to quell the anxiety generated by her living situation and her

attitude toward it. Offering these kinds of potentially very addictive drugs to a woman in such circumstances is

tantamount to offering her a few stiff shots of gin. Either gin or a tranquilizer will dull the pain temporarily, but its

use may create even more problems, while solving none.

Unavoidably, by the time a woman is at this point in the progression of her disease, there will be physical

problems as well as emotional ones. Any of the disorders associated with subjection to prolonged and severe stress

may manifest themselves. As previously noted, a dependency on food or alcohol or other drugs may develop. There

may also be digestive problems and/or ulcers, as well as all kinds of skin problems, allergies, high blood pressure,

nervous tics, insomnia, and constipation or diarrhea or both, alternatively. Periods of depression may begin, or if, as

is so often the case, depression has already been a problem, the episodes may now lengthen and deepen alarmingly.

At this point, when the body begins to break down due to the effects of stress, we enter the chronic phase. Perhaps

the hallmark of the chronic phase is that by now thinking has become so impaired, it is difficult for the woman to be

able to assess her situation at all objectively. There is a gradually progressive insanity implicit in loving too much,

and by this stage the insanity is in full flower. She is now totally unable to see what her choices are in terms of the

life she is living. Much of what she does is in *reaction* to her partner, including love affairs, obsession with work or

with other interests, or devotion to “causes” in which she again tries to help/control the lives and conditions of

others around her. Sadly, even her turning to people and interests outside the relationship is by now part of her

obsession.

She has become bitterly envious of people who don't have her problems, and more and more she finds herself

increasingly taking her frustrations out on all those around her, through increasingly violent attacks on her partner

and often her children as well. At this point, as the ultimate attempt to control her partner through guilt, she may

threaten or actually attempt suicide. Needless to say, by now she and everyone around her is very, very sick,

certainly emotionally and often physically as well.

It is instructive to consider too for a moment how a child whose mother suffers from the disease of loving too

much would be affected. Many of the women in the stories you have read here grew up under those conditions.

When the woman who has begun by loving too much finally realizes that she has tried everything to change her

man and that her best efforts have failed, perhaps she is able to see that she must get help. Usually the help she seeks

involves turning to someone else, perhaps a professional, in one more attempt to change her man. It is *crucial* that

the person to whom she turns helps her recognize that she is the one who must change, that her recovery must begin

with herself.

This is very important, because loving too much is a progressive disease, as has been so clearly demonstrated. A

woman like Margo is on her way toward dying. Perhaps death will come from a stress-related disorder such as heart

failure or a stroke, or any other physical ailment caused or exacerbated by stress. Or she may die by the violence that

has now become so much a part of her life, or perhaps in an accident that wouldn't have occurred if she hadn't been

distracted by her obsession. She may die very quickly or spend many years in progressive deterioration. Whatever

the apparent cause of death, I want to reiterate that loving too much can kill you.

Now let us return to Margo, dismayed by the turn of events in her life and at least for the moment tentatively looking

for help. Margo really has only two choices. She needs to have them delineated clearly for her and then she must

choose between them.

She can continue to search for the perfect partner. Given her predilection for hostile, untrustworthy men, she will

inevitably be drawn to more of the same types she has already known. Or she can begin the very difficult and

demanding task of bringing into conscious awareness her unhealthy patterns of relating, while objectively

scrutinizing the ingredients that have added up to “attraction” between herself and various men. She can either

continue to look outside herself for the man who will make her happy or she can begin the slow and painstaking (but

ultimately far more rewarding) process of learning to love and nurture herself with the help and support of peers.

Sadly, the vast majority of women like Margo will choose to continue practicing their addiction, searching for the

magic man who will make them happy, or endlessly trying to control and improve the man they are with.

It seems so much easier and feels so much more familiar to keep on looking for a source of happiness outside

oneself than to practice the discipline required to build one’s own inner resources, to learn to fill the emptiness from

inside rather than outside. But for those of you who are wise enough, weary enough, or desperate enough to want to

get well more than you want to either fix the man you are with or find a new one—for those of you who really do

want to change *yourself*, the steps of recovery follow.

10

The Road to Recovery

If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all.

—Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving

Having read in these pages of so many women who are so much alike in their unhealthy ways of relating, perhaps

you believe by now that this is a disease. What, then, is its appropriate treatment? How can a woman caught in its

grip recover? How does she begin to leave behind that endless series of struggles with “him,” and learn to use her

energies in creating a rich and fulfilling existence for herself ? And how does she differ from the many women who

do not recover, who are never able to extricate themselves from the mire and the misery of unsatisfactory

relationships?

It is certainly not the severity of her problems that determines whether or not a woman will recover. Before

recovery, women who love too much are very much alike in character, regardless of the specific details of any

present circumstances or past histories. But a woman who has overcome her pattern of loving too much is

profoundly different from who and what she was prior to recovery.

Perhaps, until now, it was luck or fate that has determined which of these women would find her way and which

wouldn't. However, my observation has been that all women who do recover have eventually taken certain steps in

order to do so. Through trial and error, and often without guidelines, they nevertheless, again and again, ultimately

followed the program of recovery I will outline for you. Further, in my personal and professional experience, I have

never seen a woman who took these steps fail to recover, and I have never seen a woman recover who failed to take

these steps. If that sounds like a guarantee, it is. Women who follow these steps will get well.

The steps are simple, but not easy. They are all equally important and are listed in the most chronologically

typical order:

1. Go for help.
2. Make your own recovery the first priority in your life.
3. Find a support group of peers who understand.
4. Develop your spiritual side through daily practice.
5. Stop managing and controlling others.
6. Learn to not get “hooked” into the games.
7. Courageously face your own problems and shortcomings.
8. Cultivate whatever needs to be developed in yourself.
9. Become “selfish.”
10. Share with others what you have experienced and learned.

One by one, we will explore what each one of these steps means, what it requires, why it is necessary, and what its

implications are.

1. Go for help.

What it means

The first step in going for help may involve anything from checking a relevant book out of the library (which can

take enormous courage; it feels as if *everyone* is watching!) to making an appointment to see a therapist. It may

mean an anonymous call to a hotline to talk about what you've always tried so hard to keep secret, or contacting an

agency in your community that specializes in the kind of problem you're facing, whether it is co-alcoholism, a

history of incest, a partner who is battering you, or whatever. It may mean finding out where a self-help group meets

and getting up the courage to go, or taking a class through adult education, or going to a counseling center that deals

with your type of problem. It may even mean calling the police. Basically, going for help means *doing something*,

taking the first step, reaching out. It is very important to understand that going for help does *not* mean threatening

your partner with the fact that you are thinking of doing so. Such a move is usually an attempt to blackmail him into

shaping up so that you don't have to publicly expose him for the terrible person he is. Leave him out of it.

Otherwise, going for help (or threatening to do so) is just one more attempt to manage and control him. Try to

remember, you are doing this for *you*.

What going for help requires

To go for help you must, at least temporarily, give up the idea that you can handle it alone. You must face the reality

that, over time, things have gotten worse in your life, not better, and realize that in spite of your best efforts, you are

not able to solve the problem. This means that you must become honest with yourself about how bad it really is.

Unfortunately, this honesty comes to some of us only when life has dealt us such a blow or series of blows that

we've been knocked to our knees and are gasping for breath. Since that's usually a temporary situation, the moment

we're able to function again, we try to pick up where we left off—being strong, managing, controlling, and going it

alone. Do not settle for temporary relief. If you start by reading a book, then you need to take the step after that,

which is probably to contact some of the sources for help that the book recommends. (For example, see the

appendixes at the back of this book for suggested reading as well as a list of places to go to for help.)

If you make an appointment with a professional, find out whether that person understands the dynamics of your

particular problem. If, for instance, you've been a victim of incest, someone without special training and expertise in

that area is not going to be nearly as helpful to you as someone who *knows* what you've gone through and how it has

probably affected you.

See someone who is able to ask questions about your family's history similar to those raised in this book. You

may want to know if your potential therapist agrees with the premise that loving too much is a progressive illness

and accepts the treatment approach outlined here.

My strong personal bias is that women should see women counselors. We share the basic experience of what it is

to be a woman in this society, and this creates a special depth of understanding. We are also able to avoid the almost

inevitable man-woman games we might be tempted to play with a male therapist or which, unfortunately, he might

be tempted to play with us.

But just seeing a woman is not enough. She must also be aware of the most effective methods of treatment,

depending on which factors are present in your history, and be willing to refer you to an appropriate peer support

group—indeed, even to make participation in such a group a mandatory element of treatment.

For example, I will not counsel someone who is co-alcoholic unless she becomes involved in Al-Anon. If she is

unwilling to do so after several visits, I make an agreement with her that should she become willing to do so I will

see her again, but not otherwise. My experience teaches me that without involvement in Al-Anon, co-alcoholics do

not recover. Instead, they repeat their patterns of behavior and continue their unhealthy ways of thinking, and

therapy alone is not enough to turn this around. With both therapy and A]-Anon, however, recovery happens much

more quickly; these two treatment aspects complement each other very well.

Your therapist should have a similar requirement that you join a self-help group that is appropriate for you.

Otherwise, she may be enabling you to complain about your situation without requiring that you do all you can to

help yourself.

Once you find someone who is good, you must stick with her and follow her recommendations. No one ever

changed a lifelong pattern of relating through just one or two visits to a professional.

Going for help may require that you spend money, or it may not. Many agencies have sliding scales for fees

according to your ability to pay, and there is no correlation between the most expensive therapist and the most

effective treatment. Many very competent and dedicated individuals work for such agencies. What you are looking

for is someone who has experience and expertise and is a person with whom you feel comfortable. Trust your

feelings and be willing to see several therapists if necessary in order to find one who is right for you.

It is not absolutely necessary that you specifically enter therapy to recover. In fact, seeing the wrong therapist will

do more harm than good. But someone who understands the disease process involved in loving too much can be of

inestimable help to you.

Going for help does not require that you be willing to terminate your present relationship if you are in one. Nor is

that a requirement at any time throughout the process of recovery. As you follow these steps, one through ten, the

relationship will take care of itself. When women come to see me, they often want to leave their relationship before

they are ready, which means they will either go back or else begin a new, equally unhealthy one. If they follow these

ten steps, their perspective on whether to stay or to leave changes. Being with him ceases to be The Problem and

leaving him ceases to be The Solution. Instead, the relationship becomes one of the many considerations that must

be addressed in the overall picture of how they live their lives.

Why going for help is necessary

It is necessary because you've already tried so hard, and none of your best efforts have worked in the long run.

Though they may have brought occasional temporary relief, the overall picture is one of progressive deterioration.

The tricky part here is that you are probably not in touch with just how bad it has gotten because you undoubtedly

have a great measure of denial operating in your life. That is the nature of the disease. For instance, I've been told

countless times by women clients that their children don't know anything is wrong at home, or that these children

sleep through the nightly fights. This is a very common example of self-protective denial. If these women faced the

fact that their children are truly suffering, they would be overwhelmed by guilt and remorse. On the other hand, their

denial makes it very hard for them to see the severity of the problem and get the necessary help.

Take for granted that your situation is worse than you will allow yourself to acknowledge at present, and that your

disease is progressing. Understand that you require appropriate treatment, that you cannot do it alone.

What going for help implies

One of the most feared implications is that the relationship, if there is one, may end. This is by no means necessarily

true, although, should you follow these steps, I guarantee that the relationship will either improve or end. It, and you,

will not stay the same.

Another feared implication is that the secret is out. Once a woman has sincerely sought help, there is rarely regret for

having done so, but the fear beforehand can be monumental. Whether the problems a given woman lives with are

unpleasant and inconvenient or severely damaging and even life-threatening, she may or may not choose to go for

help. It is the magnitude of her fear, and sometimes her pride as well, that determine whether she seeks help, and not

the severity of her problems.

For many women, reaching out does not even seem to be an option; to do so feels like taking an unnecessary risk

in an already precarious situation. “I didn’t want to make him angry” is the classic answer of the beaten wife when

questioned as to why she didn’t call the police. A deep and profound fear of making things worse and, ironically, a

conviction that she can still control the situation somehow prohibit her from reaching out to authorities, or to others

who might help her. On a less dramatic scale this is also true. A frustrated wife may not want to rock the boat

because her husband’s cold indifference to her is “not that bad.” She tells herself that he is basically a good man,

free of many of the undesirable traits she sees in her friends’ husbands, and so she puts up with a nonexistent sex

life, his discouraging attitude toward her every enthusiasm, or his preoccupation with sports during every waking

moment of the time they share at home together. This is not tolerance on her part. It is a lack of trust that the

relationship can survive her unwillingness to continue waiting patiently for his attention, which never comes, and it

is, even more to the point, a lack of conviction that she deserves more happiness than she is getting. This is a key

concept in recovery. Do you deserve better than your present circumstances? What are you willing to do to make it

better for yourself? Begin at the beginning, and go for help.

2. Make your own recovery your first priority.

What it means

Making your own recovery your first priority means deciding that, no matter what is required, you are willing to

take those steps necessary to help yourself. Now, if that sounds extreme, think for a moment about to what lengths

you would be willing to go to make *him* change, to help *him* recover. Then just turn the force of that energy on

yourself. The magic formula here is that although all your hard work and efforts cannot change *him*, you *can*, with

that same expenditure of energy, change yourself. So, use your power where it will do some good—on your own

life!

What making your own recovery your first priority requires

It requires a total commitment to yourself. This may be the first time in your life that you have regarded yourself as

truly important, truly worthy of your own attention and nurturing. This is probably very hard for you to do, but if

you go through the motions of keeping appointments, participating in a support group, and so on, you will be helped

to learn how to value and promote your own well-being. So for a while just make yourself show up, and the healing

process will begin. Soon you will feel so much better that you'll want to continue.

To help the process, be willing to educate yourself about your problem. If you grew up in an alcoholic family, for

instance, read the books on that subject recommended in Appendix 3. Go to relevant lectures on the subject and find

out what is now known about the effects of that experience in later life. It will be uncomfortable and even painful

sometimes to expose yourself to that input, but not nearly as uncomfortable as continuing to live out your patterns

without any understanding of how your past controls you. With understanding comes the opportunity for choice, so

the greater your understanding, the greater your freedom of choice.

Also required is the willingness to *continue* to spend time and perhaps money, too, to get well. If you balk at

spending time and money on your own recovery, if it seems wasteful, consider how much time and money you have

spent trying to avoid the pain either from being in your relationship or from having it end. Drinking, using drugs,

eating too much, taking trips to get away from it all, having to replace things (either his or yours) that you've broken

in fits of anger, missing work, expensive long-distance phone calls to him or to someone you hope will understand,

buying him presents to make up, buying yourself presents to help you forget, spending days and nights crying over

him, neglecting your health to the point where you become seriously ill—the list of ways you have spent time and

money staying sick is probably long enough to make you very uncomfortable if you look at it honestly. Recovery

requires that you be willing to invest at least that much in getting well. And as an investment, it is guaranteed to give

you considerable returns.

Total commitment to your own recovery also requires that you severely curtail or entirely suspend your own use of

alcohol or other drugs while in the therapeutic process. The use of mind-altering substances during this time

mitigates against your fully experiencing the emotions you will be uncovering, and it is only through deeply

experiencing them that you will also gain the healing that comes with their release. Discomfort with and fear of

these feelings may prompt you to want to dull them by one means or another (including using food as a drug), but I

urge you not to. Most of the “work” of therapy happens during the hours when you are not in group or in session.

My experience with clients is that whatever connections are made during therapy sessions or between them are of

lasting value only if the mind is in an unaltered state while processing this material.

Why making your own recovery your first priority is necessary

It is necessary because if you do not, you will never have time to get well. You will be too busy doing all the things

that keep you sick.

Just as learning a new language frequently requires repeated exposure to new sounds and patterns of speech that

contradict the familiar ways of talking and thinking, and cannot be grasped at all if that exposure is infrequent or

sporadic, so recovery goes. An occasional half-hearted gesture of doing something for yourself will not be enough to

affect the entrenched ways of thinking, feeling, and relating. Through habit alone, they would reassert themselves

without remedial input.

To help put it into perspective, consider the lengths to which you would be willing to go if you had cancer and

someone offered you hope of recovery. Be willing to go to those same lengths to recover from this disease, which

destroys the quality of life and possibly even life itself.

What making your own recovery your first priority implies

Your appointments with your therapist or your time in group come first. They're more important than

- an invitation to have lunch or dinner with the man in your life
- meeting your man to talk things over
- avoiding his criticism or anger
- making him (or anyone else) happy; getting his (or anyone else's) approval

- taking a trip to get away from it all for a while (so you can return and endure some more of the same)

3. Find a support group of peers who understand.

What it means

Finding a support group of peers who understand may require an effort. If you are or ever have been in a

relationship with an alcoholic or drug abuser, go to Al-Anon; if you are the child of an alcoholic or drug abuser,

again Al-Anon is your best source of help. If you have been raped or otherwise physically or sexually abused,

resources are listed in Appendix 2 at the back of the book to direct you to appropriate counseling and support. If you

do not fit any of these categories or the specific group that best fits your needs does not exist in your community,

find a support group in which women are dealing with their problems of emotional dependency on men, or start your

own group. Guidelines for forming your own support group can be found in Appendix 1.

A support group of peers is not an unstructured meeting of women who talk about all the awful things men have

done to them, or the unlucky hands that life has dealt them. Group is a place to work on your own recovery. It is

important to talk about past traumas, but if you find yourself or others recounting long stories with lots of “he said ...

and then I said ...” in them, you are probably off the track, and possibly even in the wrong group. Empathy alone

will not elicit recovery. A good support group is dedicated to helping all who attend get better, and includes some

members who have achieved a measure of recovery themselves and can share with newcomers the principles by

which they gained it. This is nowhere better modeled than in Al-Anon. Whether or not alcoholism has touched your

life, you may want to attend one meeting or several, to see how the principles of recovery work. They are basically

the same for us all, no matter what our past or present circumstances.

What a support group requires

You need to make a commitment to yourself and to the group to attend a minimum of six meetings before you

decide that it has nothing to offer you. This is necessary because it takes that long for you to begin to feel like part of

the group, to learn the jargon if it exists, and to start to grasp the process of recovery. If you are going to Al-Anon,

which often has several meetings each week, try to attend on different days. Different groups will have different

characteristics, though the format is basically similar. Find one or two that especially suit you and stick with them,

supplementing more meetings when you feel the need.

It will be necessary to attend regularly. Though it is important to the others that you be there, your attendance is for

your own benefit. In order to receive what the group has to offer, you must show up.

Ideally, you will feel a certain level of trust, but even if that is not something you are yet able to muster, you can be

honest. Talk about your lack of trust of people in general, of the group, of the process; ironically, your trust will

begin to grow.

Why a support group of peers is necessary

As others share their stories, you will be able to identify with them and their experiences. They will help you to

remember what you've blocked from your awareness—both events and feelings. You will become more in touch

with yourself.

As you find yourself identifying with others and accepting them in spite of their flaws and their secrets, you will be

able to become more accepting of those characteristics and feelings in yourself. This is the beginning of the

development of self-acceptance, which is an absolutely vital requirement for recovery.

When you are ready, you will share some of your own experiences, and in doing so you will become more honest

and less secretive and afraid. Through the group's acceptance of what has been so unacceptable to you, your self-

acceptance will grow.

You will see others using techniques in their lives that work, which you can try for yourself. You will also see

people trying things that don't work, and you can learn from their mistakes.

Along with all the empathy and shared experience a group provides, there is an element of humor that is also vital

to recovery. The understanding smiles of recognition at yet another attempt at managing someone else, the happy

cheering when someone has gotten past an important hurdle, the release of laughter over shared idiosyncrasies—all

are truly healing.

You will begin to feel as if you belong. This is critically important for anyone coming from a dysfunctional family,

since that experience produces such strong feelings of isolation. To be with others who both understand your

experience and share it produces a sense of safety and well-being, which you need.

What finding and joining a support group of peers implies

The secret is out. True, not everyone knows, but a few people do. You walk into Al-Anon and there is the tacit

assumption that sometime, somewhere, you've been affected by alcoholism. You show up at your local women's

shelter to participate in a support group held there and it indicates that to some degree you have suffered from

domestic violence . . . and so on.

The fear that others will know keeps many people from getting the help that could salvage their lives and their

relationships. Remember, in any valid support group, your attendance there and what is discussed there is

information that never leaves the group. Your privacy is respected and protected. If it is not, you need to find a

group where it is.

On the other hand, going just once means that others know you have a problem. Hopefully, having read this far,

you can see that letting a few others know, especially when they, too, share your problem, is a way out of your

painful isolation.

4. Develop your spirituality through daily practice.

What it means

Well, it means different things to different people. For some of you, the whole idea is immediately repellent, and

you're probably wondering if you can skip this step. None of that "God" stuff for you. For you, such beliefs seem

immature and naive, and you're too sophisticated to take any of it seriously.

Others of you may already be praying determinedly to a God who doesn't seem to be listening. You've told Him

what's wrong and what needs fixing and you're still miserable. Or maybe you've prayed so hard for so long with no

visible results that you've gotten angry, given up, or feel betrayed and wonder what terrible thing you're being

punished for.

Whether or not you have a belief in God, and if you do, whether or not you're on speaking terms with Him, you

can still practice this step. Developing your spirituality can mean pretty much following whatever path you choose.

Even if you are a 100-percent atheist, perhaps you get pleasure and solace from a quiet walk, or contemplating a

sunset or some aspect of nature. Whatever takes you beyond yourself and into a broader perspective on things is

what this step is all about. Find out what brings you peace and serenity and commit some time, at least half an hour

daily, to that practice. No matter how dismaying your circumstances, this discipline can bring you relief, even

comfort.

If you are on the fence about whether there is any such thing as a higher power in the universe, you might want to

try acting as if you did believe, even if you don't. Beginning to turn over what you cannot manage to a power

greater than yourself can bring enormous relief. Or, if this feels like you're being coerced into something you don't

want to do, how about using your peer support group as a higher power? Certainly there is more strength in the

group than any one of you has all by yourself. Allow yourself to use the group as a whole for strength and support,

or make a commitment to contact an individual member to help you through it when a rough time comes along.

Know that you are no longer all alone.

If you have an active faith, and you regularly worship and frequently pray, developing your spirituality may mean

trusting that what is happening in your life has its own reason and its own results, and that God is in charge of your

partner, not *you*. Take quiet time to meditate and pray, and to ask for guidance in how to live *your own life* while

you release those around you to live theirs.

Developing your spirituality, no matter what your religious orientation, basically means *letting go of self-will*, of the

determination to make things happen the way you think they should. Instead, you must accept the fact that you may

not know what is best in a given situation either for yourself or for another person. There may be outcomes and

solutions that you have never considered, or perhaps the ones you've most feared and tried hardest to forestall may

be exactly what is necessary in order for things to begin to improve. Self-will means believing that you alone have

all the answers. Letting go of self-will means becoming willing to hold still, be open, and wait for guidance for

yourself. It means learning to let go of fear (all of the "what ifs") and despair (all of the "if onlys") and replacing

them with positive thoughts and statements about your life.

What developing your spirituality requires

It requires *willingness*, not faith. Often with willingness comes faith. If you don't want faith, you probably won't get

it, but you still may find more serenity than you've had before.

Developing your spirituality also requires that you use affirmations to overcome old patterns of thinking and feeling,

and to replace old belief systems. Whether or not you have any belief in a higher power, affirmations can change

your life. Use some of those in Appendix 4, or better yet, make up your own. Make them totally positive and repeat

them silently, or out loud if possible, every chance you get. Just to get you started, here's one: "I no longer suffer.

My life is filled with joy, prosperity, and fulfillment."

Why developing your spirituality is necessary

Without spiritual development, it is nearly impossible to let go of managing and controlling and to believe that all

will work out as it is meant to.

Spiritual practice calms you, and helps change your perspective from being victimized to being uplifted.

It is a source of strength in crisis. When feelings or circumstances are overwhelming, you need a resource greater

than yourself to which you can turn.

Without spiritual development, it is nearly impossible to let go of self-will, and without letting go of self-will you

will not be able to take the next step. You will not be able to stop managing and controlling the man in your life

because you will still believe it is your job to do so. You will not be able to surrender control of his life to a force

higher than yourself.

What developing your spirituality implies

You are freed from the overwhelming responsibility of fixing everything, controlling the man in your life, and

preventing disaster.

You have tools for finding relief that don't require that you manipulate anyone else into doing or being what you

want. No one has to change in order for you to feel good. Because you have access to spiritual nourishment, your

life and your happiness come to be more under your own control and less vulnerable to the actions of others.

5. Stop managing and controlling him.

What it means

To stop managing and controlling him means not helping and not giving advice. Let's please assume that this other

adult whom you are aiding and advising has as much capacity as you have to find himself a job, an apartment, a

therapist, an A.A. meeting, or whatever else he needs. He may not have as much *motivation* as you to find these

things for himself, or to work out his own problems. But when you take on trying to solve his problems for him, he

is freed from his own responsibility for his life. You are then in charge of his welfare, and when your efforts on his

behalf fail, *you* will be the one he blames.

Let me give you an example of how this works: I frequently receive calls from wives and girlfriends who want to

make an appointment for their partners. I always insist that those men make their own appointments with me. If the

person who is supposed to be the client hasn't enough motivation to choose his own therapist and make his own

appointment, how will he be motivated to stay in therapy and work on his own recovery? Earlier in my career as a

therapist I used to accept these appointments, only to get another call from the wife or girlfriend saying that he had

changed his mind about seeing someone, or that he didn't want to see a woman therapist, or that he wanted to see

someone with different credentials. These women would then ask if I could recommend someone else whom they

could call to make another appointment for him. I learned never to take appointments made by someone for anyone

else and instead to ask these wives and girlfriends to come in to see me for *themselves*.

Not managing or controlling him also means stepping out of the role of encouraging and praising him. Chances are

you have also used these methods to try to get him to do what you'd like, and this means they have become tools for

manipulating him. Praising and encouraging are very close to pushing, and when you do that you are trying again to

take control of his life. Think about why you are lauding something he's done. Is it to help raise his self-esteem?

That's manipulation. Is it so he will continue whatever behavior you're praising? That's manipulation. Is it so that

he'll know how proud you are of him? That can be a burden for him to carry. Let him develop his own pride from

his own accomplishments. Otherwise, you come dangerously close to playing a mothering role with him. He doesn't

need another mother (no matter how bad his mother was!), and much more to the point, you don't need him to be

your child.

It means to stop watching. Pay less attention to what he is doing and more attention to your own life. Sometimes, as

you begin to let go, your partner will "up the ante," so to speak, to keep you hooked into watching and feeling

responsible for the outcome. Things may suddenly go from bad to worse for him. Let them! His troubles are his own

to work out, not yours. Let him take the full responsibility for his problems and the full credit for his solutions. Stay

out of it. (If you're busy with your own life and you're practicing your own spiritual development, you will more

easily be able to take your eyes off him.)

It means detaching. Detaching requires that you get your ego disentangled from his feelings and especially from

his actions and their results. It requires that you allow him to deal with the consequences of his behavior, you don't

save him from *any* of his pain. You may continue to care *about* him, but you don't take care *of* him. You allow him

to find his own way, just as you are working to find yours.

What stopping the managing and controlling of him requires

It requires learning to say and do *nothing*. This is one of the most difficult tasks you face in your recovery. When his

life is unmanageable, when everything in you wants to take over, to advise and encourage him, to manipulate the

situation in whatever way you can, you must learn to hold still, to respect this other person enough to allow the

struggle to be his, not yours.

It requires facing your own fears regarding what might happen to him and to your relationship if you let go of

managing everything—and then going to work on eliminating your fears rather than manipulating him.

It requires that you use your spiritual practice to uphold you when you become frightened. Your spiritual

development is especially important as you learn to let go of feeling that you must run everything. It can actually

feel physically as though you are falling off a cliff when you begin to let go of controlling others in your life. The

sensation of being out of control of yourself when you release others from your attempts to control can be alarming.

Here your spiritual practice can help, because instead of letting go into a void, you can relinquish control of those

you love to your higher power.

It requires a hard look at what is, rather than what you hope will be. As you let go of managing and controlling,

you must also let go of the idea that “when he changes I’ll be happy.” He may never change. You must stop trying to

make him. And you must learn to be happy anyway.

Why it is necessary to stop managing and controlling him

As long as you are focused on changing someone over whom you are powerless (and we are all powerless over

changing anyone but ourselves) you cannot bring your energies to bear on helping yourself. Unfortunately, changing

someone else appeals to us much more than working on ourselves, so until we give up the former notion we’ll never

be able to get to work on the latter.

Most of the insanity and despair you experience comes directly from trying to manage and control what you cannot.

Think about all the attempts you’ve made: the endless speeches, the pleading, threats, bribes, maybe even violence,

all the avenues you’ve tried that haven’t worked. And remember how you’ve felt after each failed attempt. Your

self-esteem slipped another notch, and you became more anxious, more helpless, more angry. The only way out of

all this is to let go of the attempt to control what you cannot—him and his life.

Finally, it is necessary to stop because he will almost never change in the face of pressure from you. What should be

his problem begins to look like your problem, and somehow you end up stuck with it unless you let go. Even if he

does attempt to placate you with some promise of changing his ways, he will probably revert back to his old

behavior, often with much resentment toward you when he does so. Remember: if you are the reason he gives up a

behavior, you'll also be the reason he resumes it.

Example: Two young people are in my office. Referred by his probation officer because of alcohol or drug

offenses, he is there because he's in trouble with the law. She's there because she tries to go everywhere with him.

She sees it as her job to keep him on the straight and narrow. As is so common in such cases, both of them come

from homes where there is alcoholism in at least one parent. As they sit before me, holding hands, they tell me they

are going to get married.

"I think getting married will help him," the young woman says, sometimes with shy compassion, sometimes with

firm determination.

"Yeah," he nods sheepishly. "She keeps me from getting too wild. She helps me a lot." There is a note of relief in

his voice, and his girlfriend glows with pleasure at the faith he has in her, at the responsibility for his life that she has

been given.

And I try—gently, in the face of their hope and their love—to explain that if he has a problem with alcohol or

other drugs and she is the reason he slows down or stops drinking or using drugs now, she will also be the reason he

speeds up or starts drinking and using drugs all over again later. I warn them both that someday he will say to her, in

the middle of an argument, “I quit for you and what difference has it made? You’re never happy, so why should I

keep trying?” Soon they will be torn apart by the very forces that seem now to bring them together.

What the implications are when you stop managing and controlling him

He may become very angry and accuse you of not caring about him anymore. This anger generates from his panic at

having to become responsible for his own life. As long as he can fight with you, make you promises, or try to win

you back, his struggle is outside, with you, and not inside with himself. (Sound familiar? It’s true for you, too, as

long as your struggle is with him.)

You may find there is very little to talk about once all the cajoling, arguing, threatening, fighting, and making up

stops. It’s okay. Say your affirmations quietly to yourself in the silence.

It is very likely that, once you truly let go of managing and controlling him, a great deal of your energy will be freed

up that you can then use for exploring, developing, and enhancing yourself. It is important to know, however, that

the temptation will be there to again look outside yourself for a *raison d’être*. Curb this inclination and stay focused

on yourself.

It is only fair to mention that as you let go of the role of smoothing out his life, things may get chaotic, and you may

receive some criticism from people who don't understand what you are doing (or not doing). Try not to be

defensive, and don't bother going into detailed explanations for them. If you like, recommend they read this book,

and then drop the subject. If they persist, avoid them for a while.

Usually, such criticism is far less frequent and far less intense than we both expect and fear. We are our own

worst critics, and we project our expectation of criticism out onto those around us, seeing it and hearing it

everywhere. Be on your own side in all this, and the world will magically become a more approving place.

One of the implications of letting go of managing and controlling others is that you must relinquish the identity of

“being helpful,” but ironically, that very act of letting go is frequently the single most helpful thing you can do for

the one you love. The identity of “being helpful” is an ego trip. If you really want to be helpful, let go of his

problems and help yourself.

6. Learn to not get hooked into the games.

What it means

The concept of games as they apply to dialogue between two people comes from the type of psychotherapy known

as transactional analysis. Games are structured ways of interacting that are employed to avoid intimacy. Everybody

resorts to games in their interactions sometimes, but in unhealthy relationships, the games abound. They are

stereotyped ways of responding that serve to circumvent any genuine exchange of information and feelings, and

allow the participants to put the responsibility for their well-being or distress in each other's hands. Typically, the

roles played by women who love too much and their partners are varieties of the rescuer, persecutor, and victim

positions. Each of the pair plays each of these roles many times in a typical exchange. We will designate the role of

rescuer as (R), define it as "trying to help"; the role of persecutor as (P) and define it as "trying to blame"; and the

role of victim as (V), defined as "the one who is blameless and helpless." The following script will illustrate how

this game works:

Tom, who often comes home late, has just arrived in his bedroom. It is 11:30 P.M. and his wife, Mary,

begins.

Mary (*tearfully*): (V) Where were you? I've been so worried. I couldn't sleep, I was so afraid there'd been

an accident. You know how I worry. How could you let me lie here like this and not at least call to let me

know you were still alive?

Tom (*placating*): (R) Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I thought you'd be asleep and I didn't want to wake you up by

calling. Don't be upset. I'm home now and I'll call next time, I promise. As soon as I get ready for bed I'll

rub your back and you'll feel better.

Mary (*getting angry*) : (P) I don't want you to touch me! You say you'll call next time! That's a joke. You

told me the last time this happened that you'd call, and did you? No! You don't care if I lie here thinking of

you dead out on the highway. You never think of anybody else, so you don't know how it feels to worry

about somebody you love.

Tom (*helplessly*): (V) Honey, that's not true. I was thinking of you. I didn't want to wake you. I didn't know

you'd be upset. I was just trying to be thoughtful. Seems like no matter what I try, I'm wrong. What if I'd

called you and you were asleep? Then I'd be a jerk for waking you up. I can't win.

Mary (*relenting*): (R) Now, that's not true. It's just that you're so important to me; I want to know that

you're all right, not run over somewhere. I'm not trying to make you feel bad; I just want you to understand

that I worry about you because I love you so much. I'm sorry I got so mad.

Tom (*sensing an edge*): (P) Well, if you worry so much, why aren't you glad to see me when I get home?

How come you hit me with all this whining about where I was? Don't you trust me? I'm getting tired of

having to explain everything to you all the time. If you trusted me you'd go to sleep, and when I got home

you'd be glad to see me instead of jumping all over me! Sometimes I think you just like to fight.

Mary (*voice rising*): (P) Glad to see you! After lying here for two hours wondering where you were? If I

don't trust you it's because you never do anything to help me build that trust. You don't call, you blame me

for being upset, and then accuse me of not being nice to you when you finally drag in the door! Why don't

you just turn around and go back wherever you came from, wherever you've been all evening. **Tom**

(*soothing*): (R) Look, I know you're upset, and I've got a big day tomorrow. How about if I make you a cup

of tea? That's what you need. Then I'll take a shower and come to bed. Okay?

Mary (*crying*): (V) You just don't understand how it feels to be waiting and waiting, knowing that you *could*

call but don't, because I'm not that important to you....

Shall we stop here? As you can probably see, these two could go on trading places on their triangle of positions as

rescuer, persecutor, and victim for many more hours or days, even years. If you find yourself responding to any

statement or action of another person from any of these positions, beware!
You are participating in a no-win cycle of

accusation, rebuttal, blame, and counterblame that is pointless, futile, and
degrading. Stop. Let go of trying to make

it turn out the way you want it to by being nice, being angry, or being
helpless. Change what you can, which means

change yourself! Stop needing to win. Stop even needing to fight, or to
make him give you a good reason or excuse

for his behavior or neglect. Stop needing him to be sufficiently sorry.

What not getting hooked into the games requires

Not getting hooked requires that even though you are tempted to respond in
any one of the ways you know will keep

the game going, you don't. You respond in a way that will end the game.
It's a little tricky at first, but with practice

you'll easily master it (if you also master your need to play the games in the
first place, which is part of the previous

step: letting go of managing and controlling).

Let's look again at the situation above and see how Mary could stay off that
deadly triangle with Tom. By now,

Mary has started developing her spirituality, and she is aware that she has
no business trying to manage and control

Tom. Because she is working on taking care of herself, earlier this evening,
when it began to get late and Tom

hadn't come home, instead of allowing herself to get nervous and worked
up about it, she called a friend in her

support group. They talked about her mounting fear, which helped to calm her. Mary needed someone to hear how

she felt, and her friend listened with understanding but without giving advice. After she hung up, she practiced one

of her favorite affirmations: “My life is divinely guided, and I grow in peace, security, and serenity every day, every

hour.” Since no one can hold two separate thoughts at once, Mary found that as she gave her thoughts over to the

soothing words of the affirmation, she became calm and even relaxed. By the time Tom got home at 11:30, she was

asleep. He woke her when he came into the room, and she immediately felt the annoyance and anger returning, so

she repeated her affirmation to herself a couple of times and said, “Hi, Tom. I’m glad you’re home.” Now, Tom has

always been used to a battle under these circumstances, and was a little nonplussed at her casual greeting. “I was

going to call you, but . . .” he begins his excuse defensively. Mary waits till he’s finished and says, “We can talk

about it in the morning if you like. I’m too sleepy now. Good night.” If Tom was feeling guilty about the lateness of

the hour, a fight with Mary would actually have eased his guilt. He could then tell himself that she was a nagging

shrew and the problem would become hers, for nagging, instead of his, for being late. As it is, he’s left with his

guilt, and she’s not suffering because of his actions. That’s the way it should be.

It's kind of like a game of Ping-Pong, when you're both doing the rescuer-persecutor-victim thing. You keep

hitting the ball back, when it comes your way. In order not to get hooked into playing, you have to learn to let the

ball go right past you, off the end of the table. One of the greatest ways of letting it go is to cultivate the use of the

word *Oh*. For instance, in response to Tom's excuse, Mary can just respond, "Oh," and go back to sleep. It is an

empowering experience not to get caught up in the struggle implicit in the rescuer-persecutor-victim kind of

exchange. To not get hooked, to maintain your centeredness, your dignity, feels wonderful. And it means you've

taken another step in your own recovery.

Why not getting hooked into the games is necessary

To begin with, understand that the game roles we play are not confined to mere verbal exchanges. They extend to

the way we play out our lives, and each of us has a particular role that we may especially favor.

Perhaps yours is the role of rescuer. It is familiar and comforting to many women who love too much to feel that

they are taking care of (managing and controlling) another person. Out of their chaotic and/or deprived history they

have chosen this path as a way of staying safe and earning some degree of self-acceptance. They do it with friends,

family members, and often in their careers as well.

Or perhaps you find yourself playing the persecutor, the woman who is intent on finding the fault, pointing it out,

and setting things right. Again and again, this woman must re-create the struggle with the dark forces that defeated

her as a child, hoping to have more parity in the battle now that she is an adult. Angry from childhood and seeking to

avenge herself in the present for the past, she is a fighter, a scrapper, a debater, a harridan. She needs to punish. She

demandes apologies, retribution.

And finally, you may, alas, be the victim, the most powerless of the three, seeing no options but to be at the whim

of others' behavior. Perhaps there seemed to be no options when you were a child other than being victimized, but

now the role is so familiar that there is actually strength to be gained from it. There is a tyranny in weakness; its coin

is guilt, and that is the currency of exchange in the victim's relationships.

To play any of these positions, whether in a conversation or in life, keeps the focus off yourself and holds you in

your childhood pattern of fear, rage, and helplessness. You cannot develop your potential as a fully evolved human

being, an adult who is in charge of her life, if you do not give up each of these restrictive roles, these ways of being

obsessed with the others around you. As long as you are caught up in these roles, these games, it will appear that

another person is keeping you from your goal of happiness. Once you have let go of the games, you are left with

total responsibility for your own behavior, your own choices, and your own life. In fact, when the games stop, your

choices (both those you've already made and those that are now other options) become more obvious, less

avoidable.

What not getting hooked into the games implies

You now must develop new ways of communicating with yourself and others that demonstrate your willingness to

take responsibility for your life. Less of "If it weren't for ..." and lots more of "Right now I'm choosing to ..."

You will need all the energy that was freed by letting go of managing and controlling when you begin to practice

this step, to avoid falling into the games (even announcing "I'm not playing" is playing). It becomes much easier

with practice, and after time becomes very self-reinforcing.

You will need to learn to live without all the excitement of the heated battles, those time-consuming, energy-

draining dramas in which you've been costarring. This is not easy to do. Many women who love too much have

buried their feelings so deeply that they need the excitement of fights, partings, and reconciliations to even feel

alive. Beware! Having nothing but your own inner life on which to concentrate may be boring at first. But if you can

hold still with the boredom, it will metamorphose into self-discovery. And you will be ready for the next step.

7. Courageously face your own problems and shortcomings.

What it means

Facing your own problems means that, having let go of managing and controlling others and of the games, you now

are left with nothing to distract you from your own life, your own problems, and your own pain. This is the time

when you need to begin to look at yourself deeply, with the help of your spiritual program, your support group, and

your therapist if you have one. It is not always necessary to have a therapist for this process. In the Anonymous

programs, for instance, people who have experienced a degree of recovery may become sponsors to newcomers, and

in that role will often help those they sponsor go through this process of self-examination.

It also means that you look hard at your own life in the present, both at what you feel good about and what makes

you uncomfortable or unhappy. Write it out in lists. Also look at the past. Examine all the good and bad memories,

the accomplishments, the failures, the times you were hurt, and the times you did the hurting. Look at it *all*, again in

writing. Focus on areas of particular difficulty. If sex is one of these areas, write out a complete personal sexual

history. If men have always been a problem to you, start with your earliest relationships with men, and again, do a

complete history. Parents? Use the same technique with them. Start at the beginning and write. Lots of writing, yes,

but it is an invaluable tool to help you sort out your past and to begin to recognize the patterns, the repeating themes,

in your struggles with yourself and others.

When you begin this process, do as complete a job as you can before you stop. This is a technique you will want

to use again later, when problem areas crop up. Perhaps at first you will concentrate on relationships. Later, at

another time, you may want to write out your history of jobs, how you felt about each one before you started, during

the period of your employment, and afterward. Just let your memories, thoughts, and feelings flow. Don't examine

your writing for patterns as you go; do this afterward.

What courageously facing your own problems and shortcomings requires

You will have to do a great deal of writing, making the commitment of time and energy necessary to accomplish it.

Writing may not be an easy or comfortable means of expression for you. It is, however, the best technique for this

exercise. Do not worry about doing it perfectly, or even well. Just do it in a way that makes sense to you.

You will need to be as completely honest and self-revealing as possible in all that you write.

Once you have completed this project as well as you can, share it with one other human being who cares about you

and whom you trust. This person should be someone who understands what you are trying to do to recover and can

simply listen to what you have written about your sexual history, your relationship history, your history with your

parents, your feelings about yourself, and the events in your life, both good and bad. The person you choose as a

listener should obviously have compassion and understanding. There is no need for comment at all, and this should

be understood from the beginning. No advice, no encouragement. Just listening.

At this point in your recovery, do *not* make your partner the person who hears all this from you. Much, much later

you may choose to share with him what you have written, or you may not. But it is not appropriate to share this with

him now. You are letting someone hear it so that you can experience what it is like to tell your story, and be

accepted. This is not a device for ironing out wrinkles in the relationship. Its purpose is self-discovery, period.

Why courageously facing your own problems and shortcomings is necessary

Most of us who love too much are caught up in blaming others for the unhappiness in our lives, while denying our

own faults and our own choices. This is a cancerous approach to life that must be rooted out and eliminated, and the

way to do so is to take a good, hard, honest look at ourselves. Only by seeing your problems and your faults (and

your good points and successes) as *yours*, rather than related somehow to him, can you take the steps to change what

needs to be changed.

What courageously facing your own problems and shortcomings implies

First, you will very likely be able to let go of secret guilt connected with many of the events and feelings of the past.

This will clear the way for allowing more joy and healthier attitudes to be manifest in your life.

Then, because someone has heard your worst secrets and you haven't been destroyed by that fact, you will begin to

feel safer in the world.

When you let go of blaming others and take responsibility for your own choices, you become free to embrace all

kinds of options that were not available to you when you saw yourself as a victim of others. This prepares you to

begin to change those things in your life that are either not good for you, not satisfying, or unfulfilling.

8. Cultivate whatever needs to be developed in yourself.

What it means

Cultivating whatever needs to be developed in yourself means not waiting for him to change before you get on with

life. This also means not waiting for his support—financially, emotionally, or in practical matters—for you to start

your career, or change your career, or go back to school, or whatever it is you want to do. Instead of making your

plans dependent on his cooperation, make them as though you had no one but yourself on whom to lean. Cover all

the contingencies—child care, money, time, transportation—without using him as a resource (or an excuse!). If you

are protesting as you read this that without his cooperation your plans are impossible, consider by yourself, or

brainstorm with a friend, how you would do it if you didn't even know him. You'll find that it is very possible to

make life work for you when you stop depending on him and instead make use of all your other options.

Cultivating yourself means actively pursuing your interests. If you've been too busy for too long with him and you

don't have a life of your own at all, then begin by pursuing lots of different avenues to find out what does appeal to

you. This is not an easy thing for most women who love too much. Having made that man your project for so long,

it feels uncomfortable to switch the focus to yourself and to explore what is good for your own growth. Be willing to

try at least one brand-new activity each week. Look at life as a smorgasbord, and help yourself to lots of different

experiences so that you can discover what appeals to you.

Cultivating yourself means taking risks: encountering new people, going into a classroom for the first time in years,

taking a trip alone, looking for a job . . . whatever you know you need to do, but haven't been able to summon the

courage for. This is the time to plunge ahead. There are *no* mistakes in life, only lessons, so get out there and let

yourself learn some of what life wants to teach you. Use your support group as a source of encouragement and

feedback. (Do not turn to your relationship or to that dysfunctional family of origin for encouragement. They need

for you to stay the same, so that they can stay the same. Don't sabotage yourself and your growth by leaning on

them.)

What cultivating whatever needs developing in yourself requires

To begin with, do two things each day that you don't want to do, in order to stretch yourself and expand your idea of

who you are and what you are capable of doing. Stand up for yourself when you'd rather pretend it doesn't matter,

or return an item that is unsatisfactory even if you'd rather just throw it away. Make that phone call you'd like to

avoid. Learn how to take better care of yourself and less care of everyone else in your interactions. Say no to please

yourself, rather than yes to please someone else. Ask clearly for something you want, and risk being refused.

Then, learn to give to yourself. Give time, give attention, give material objects. Often making a commitment to buy

yourself something every day can be a real lesson in self-love. The gifts can be inexpensive, but frankly the less

practical and more frivolous, the better. This is an exercise in *self*-indulgence. We need to learn that we ourselves

can be the source of good things in our lives, and this is a good way to begin. But if you have no problem spending

money on yourself, if indeed you shop and spend compulsively to assuage your anger or your depression, then this

lesson in giving to yourself needs to take a different direction. Treat yourself to new experiences rather than

gathering up more material objects (and more debts). Take a stroll in the park or a hike in the hills or a trip to the

zoo. Stop and watch the sunset. The point is to think about yourself and what you'd like your present for the day to

be, then to allow yourself to experience both the giving and the receiving. We are usually very good at giving to

others, but very unpracticed at giving to ourselves. So practice!

In taking these steps, you will be required to do something from time to time that is very difficult. You will have to

face the terrible emptiness within that surfaces when you are not focused on someone else. Sometimes the emptiness

will be so deep, you will almost be able to feel the wind blowing through the place where your heart should be.

Allow yourself to feel it, in all its intensity (otherwise you'll look for another unhealthy way to distract yourself).

Embrace the emptiness and know that you will not always feel this way, and that just by holding still and feeling it

you will begin to fill it with the warmth of self-acceptance. Let your support group help you with this. Their

acceptance can also help fill the void, as can your *own* projects and activities. We achieve a sense of self from what

we do for ourselves and how we develop our own capacities. If all your efforts have gone into developing others,

you're bound to feel empty. Take your turn now.

Why cultivating whatever needs to be developed in you is necessary

Unless you maximize your own talents, you will always be frustrated. And that frustration may then be blamed on

him, when it actually issues from your not getting on with your *own* life. Developing your potential takes the blame

off him and puts the responsibility for your life squarely where it belongs—with you.

The projects and activities you choose to pursue will keep you too busy to be able to focus on what he is and isn't

doing. If you are not currently in a relationship, this will give you a healthy, wholesome alternative to either pining

for your last love or waiting for your next one.

What cultivating whatever needs developing in yourself implies

For one thing, you won't need to find a partner who is your opposite in order to bring balance into your life. To

explain: Like most women who love too much, you are probably overly serious and responsible. Unless you actively

cultivate your playful side, you will be drawn to men who embody what you lack. A carefree, irresponsible man

makes a charming acquaintance but is a poor prospect for a satisfying relationship. Nevertheless, until you can give

yourself permission to be more free and easy, you'll need him to create the fun and excitement in your life.

For another thing, cultivating yourself enables you to grow up. As you become all you are capable of being, you also

take full responsibility for your decisions, your choices, your life, and in this way you embrace adulthood. Until we

take responsibility for our own lives and our own happiness, we are not fully mature human beings, but rather

remain dependent and frightened children in adult bodies.

Finally, developing yourself makes you better partner material, because you are a fully expressive, creative woman,

not someone who is incomplete (and therefore frightened) without a man. Ironically, the less you need a partner, the

better partner you become—and the healthier partner you will attract (and be attracted to).

9. Become selfish

What it means

Like the word *spirituality* in step 4, *selfish* here requires careful explanation. It probably conjures up an image of

exactly what you don't want to be: indifferent, cruel, thoughtless, self-centered. For some people, selfishness may

mean all this, but remember, you are a woman with a history of loving too much. For you, becoming selfish is a

necessary exercise in letting go of martyrdom. Let's look at what healthy selfishness means for women who love too

much:

You put your well-being, your desires, your work, play, plans, and activities first instead of last—before, instead of

after, everyone else's needs are met. Even if you are the parent of small children you incorporate into your day some

purely self-nurturing activities.

You expect and even require that situations and relationships be comfortable for you. You do not try to adapt

yourself to fit uncomfortable ones.

You believe that your wants and needs are very important, and that meeting them is your job. At the same time, you

grant others the right to be responsible for meeting their own wants and needs.

What becoming selfish requires

As you begin to put yourself first, you must learn to tolerate other people's anger and disapproval. These are

inevitable reactions from those whose welfare you have heretofore put before your own. Do not argue, apologize, or

attempt to justify yourself. Remain as even-tempered and cheerful as possible and go on about your activities. The

changes you are making in your life require that those around you change, too, and they will naturally resist. But

unless you give credence to their indignation, it will be fairly short-lived. It is just an attempt to push you back into

your old, selfless behavior, into doing for them what they can and should do for themselves.

You must listen carefully to your inner voice regarding what is good for you, right for you, and then follow it. This

is how you develop healthy self-interest, by listening to your own cues. Up to now you've probably been nearly

psychic at picking up other people's cues about how they wanted you to behave. Tune those cues out, or they'll

continue to drown out your own.

Becoming selfish finally requires that you recognize your worth is great, that your talents are worthy of expression,

that your fulfillment is as important as anyone else's, and that your best self is the greatest gift you have to give the

world as a whole, and most especially those closest to you.

Why becoming selfish is necessary

Without this strong commitment to yourself, the tendency is to become passive, to develop yourself not for your

own greatest expression but for someone else's benefit. Although becoming selfish (which also means becoming

honest) will make you a better partner, that cannot be your ultimate goal. Your goal must be the achievement of your

own highest self.

Rising above all the difficulties you've encountered isn't enough. There is still your own life to be lived, your own

potential to be explored. It is the natural next step as you gain respect for yourself and start honoring your wants and

your wishes.

Taking responsibility for yourself and your happiness gives a great freedom to children who have felt guilty and

responsible for your unhappiness (which they always do). A child can never hope to balance the scales or repay the

debt when a parent has sacrificed her life, her happiness, her fulfillment for the child or the family. Seeing a parent

fully embrace life gives the child permission to do the same, just as seeing a parent suffer indicates to the child that

suffering is what life is all about.

What becoming selfish implies

Your relationships automatically become healthier. No one "owes" it to you to be other than they are, because you

are no longer being other than you are for them.

You free the others in your life to take care of themselves without worrying about you. (It is very likely that your

children, for instance, have been feeling responsible for easing your frustration and pain. As you do a better job of

taking care of yourself, they are freed to take better care of themselves.)

You now can say yes or no when you want to.

As you make the dramatic shift in roles from caretaker of others to caretaker of yourself, it is very likely that your

behavior will be balanced by shifts of roles throughout your relationships. If the role changes are too difficult for the

man in your life, he may leave, searching for someone else who is the way you used to be—so you may not end up

with the person you began with.

On the other hand, it's ironic that as you become better able to nurture yourself, you may find that you've

attracted someone who is able to nurture you. As we become healthier and more balanced, we attract healthier and

more balanced partners. As we become less needy, more of our needs are met. As we give up the role of

supernurturer, we make space for someone to nurture us.

10. Share with others what you have experienced and learned.

What it means

Sharing your experiences with others means remembering that this is the last step in recovery, not the first. Being

too helpful and focusing on others is part of our disease, so wait until you've worked hard on your own recovery

before you tackle this step.

In your peer support group, it means sharing with newcomers what it used to be like and how it is now. This does

not mean giving advice, only explaining what has worked for you. It also doesn't mean naming names or casting

blame on others. By the time you are at this stage of recovery you know that blaming others is not helpful to you.

Sharing with others also means that when you meet someone who is from a similar background, or in a situation

similar to what yours was, you are willing to talk about your own recovery without needing to coerce that person

into doing what you did to recover. There is no place for managing and controlling here any more than there was in

your relationship.

Sharing may mean giving some hours as a volunteer to help other women, perhaps by working on a hotline or

meeting one-to-one with someone who has reached out for help.

Finally, it may mean helping to educate the medical and counseling professions about the appropriate treatment

approach for yourself and women like you.

What sharing with others what you have experienced and learned requires

You must tap your deep sense of gratitude for having come so far, and for the help others gave you along the way

through their sharing.

You need honesty and a willingness to let go of your secrets and your need to "look good."

Finally, you must reveal a capacity to give to others without a motive of personal gratification. Most of the "giving"

we did when we were loving too much was actually manipulation. Now we are free enough to be able to give freely.

Our own needs are met and we are full of love. The natural thing to do now is to share that love, without expecting anything in return.

Why sharing what you have experienced and learned is necessary

If you believe you have an illness, you also need to realize that like an alcoholic who is sober, you could slip.

Without constant vigilance you could resume your old ways of thinking, feeling, and relating. Working with

newcomers helps to keep you in touch with how sick you once were, and how very far you've come. It keeps you

from denying how bad it really was, because a newcomer's story is going to be much like your own, and you will

remember with compassion, for her and yourself, what it was like.

By talking about it, you give hope to others, and validity to all you went through in your struggle to recover. You

gain perspective on your courage and on your life.

What sharing what you have experienced and learned implies

You will help others recover. And you will maintain your own recovery.

This sharing, then, is ultimately an act of healthy selfishness, by which you further promote your own well-being

through staying in touch with the principles of recovery that will serve you all your life.

Recovery and Intimacy: Closing the Gap

For us marriage is a journey toward an unknown destination... the discovery that people must share not only what they don't

know about each other, but what they don't know about themselves.

—Michael Ventura, "Shadow Dancing in the Marriage Zone"

"What I want to know is, where did all my sexual feelings go?" Trudi is still in motion, striding toward the couch in

my office. She throws the question over her shoulder playfully, but I note a glint of accusation in her eyes as she

sweeps by me. On her left hand a diamond engagement ring flashes a corresponding glint of its own, and I have a

strong hunch about why she made the appointment. It's been eight months since I last saw her, and today she looks

better than ever, her warm brown eyes shining and the beautiful cloud of softly waved reddish brown hair longer and

fuller than I remember. Her face has the same sweet, almost kittenish appeal, but the two looks between which she

once alternated chronically—sad little orphan or brittle sophisticate—have been replaced by a womanly glow of

confidence. She has come a long way in the three years since her suicide attempt, when her affair with Jim, the

married policeman, ended.

I'm happy to see that her recovery process is still progressing. Trudi doesn't know it yet, but even the problems

she is now encountering sexually are part of the inevitable process of her recovery.

“Tell me about it, Trudi,” I urge her, and she settles back into the couch.

“Well, I have this wonderful man in my life. You remember Hal? I was dating him when I last saw you.”

I remember the name very well. He had been one of the several young men Trudi was dating when she left

therapy. “He’s nice, but he’s a little boring,” she had said of him then. “We have great talks and he strikes me as

solid and trustworthy. He’s good-looking, too, but there are no fireworks so I guess he’s not the one.” She had

agreed with me at that time that she needed to practice being with such a man who was thoughtful and dependable,

so she decided to keep on seeing him for a while, “just for drill.”

Now Trudi continues proudly, “He’s so different from the kind of man I used to get involved with, thank God,

and we’re engaged to be married in September ... but we’re, well, kind of having some problems. It’s not us,

actually, it’s me. I’m having trouble feeling really turned on, and since that never was a problem for me before, I

want to know what’s going on. You know how I used to be. I was practically begging for sex with every one of

those men who never loved me, but since I’m no longer throwing myself at anyone, I’m like some prudish, inhibited

spinster. Here’s Hal, handsome, responsible, trustworthy, and really in love with me. And I lie there in bed with him,

feeling like a stick of wood.”

I nod, knowing Trudi is facing a hurdle most women who love too much must overcome when they recover.

Having used their sexuality as a tool to manipulate a difficult or impossible man into loving them, once that

challenge is removed they don’t know how to be sexual with a loving, giving partner.

Trudi’s discomfort is patent. She’s pounding her fist softly on her knee, emphasizing almost every word. “Why

can’t I get excited about him?” And then she stops pounding, and looks at me fearfully. “Is it because I don’t really

love him? Is that what’s wrong between us?”

“Do you think you love him?” I ask.

“I think I do, but I’m confused because everything feels different from what I’ve known before. I enjoy being

with him so much. We can talk about anything. He knows my whole story, so there aren’t any secrets between us. I

don’t pretend with him about anything. I’m completely myself, which means that I’m more relaxed with him than

I’ve ever been with any man before. I’m not always putting on a great big show, which is nice, but sometimes those

performances were easier than just relaxing and trusting that being myself will be enough to keep somebody

interested.

“We enjoy a lot of the same things—sailing and bicycling and hiking. We share almost identical values, and when

we do have a quarrel, he’s a clean fighter. In fact, having an argument with Hal is almost a pleasure. But at first even

the open, frank talks we had about our disagreements were scary for me. I wasn’t used to someone being so honest

and up front about how he felt and expecting me to be the same way. Hal helped me not to be afraid to say what I

thought or ask for what I needed from him, because he’s never punished me for being honest. We always end up

settling whatever it’s about and feeling closer afterward. He’s the best friend I’ve ever had, and I’m proud to be seen

with him. So, yes, I think I love him, but if I’m in love with him, why can’t I have a good time in bed with him?

There’s nothing wrong with the way he makes love, either. He’s very considerate, really wants to please me. That’s

very new for me. He’s not as aggressive as Jim was, but I don’t think that’s the problem. I know he thinks I’m

wonderful, and gets really excited about me, but nothing much happens on my end. I’m cold and kind of

embarrassed a lot of the time. After the way I used to be, it doesn’t make any sense, does it?”

I’m glad to be able to reassure her. “Actually, Trudi, it makes perfect sense. What you’re going through now is

something that many women who have similar histories to yours, and who have been able to recover, find

themselves facing when they begin to relate to a man who is an appropriate partner. The excitement, the challenge,

the old knot in the stomach just aren't there, and since that is what 'love' has always felt like before, they are afraid

that something very important is missing. What's missing is the craziness, the pain, the fear, the waiting, and the

hoping.

"Now, for the first time, you've got a nice, steady, reliable man who adores you, and you don't have to go to work

on him to change him. He already has the qualities you've wanted in a man, and he's made a commitment to you.

The trouble is, you've never experienced having what you wanted before. You've only known what it was like not

to have it, and to work like crazy to try and get it. You're used to the yearning and the suspense, which creates a lot

of heart-pounding excitement. Will he, won't he? Does he, doesn't he? You know what I'm talking about."

Trudi smiles. "Do I ever. But how does all this relate to my sexual feelings?"

"It relates because not having what you want is much more stimulating than having it. A kind, loving, devoted

man will never get your adrenaline running the way Jim did, for instance."

"Oh, it's true! I keep questioning the whole relationship because I'm not always obsessed with Hal. I've

wondered whether I'm just taking him for granted." Trudi is no longer angry. She's excited now, a detective

unraveling an important mystery.

I affirm, “Well, you probably do take him for granted somewhat. You know that he’ll be there for you. He’s not

going to desert you. You can count on him. So there’s no need to be obsessed. Obsession isn’t love, Trudi. It’s just

obsession.”

She nods, remembering. “I know! I know!”

“And sometimes,” I continue, “sex works very well when we’re obsessed. All those strong feelings of excitement

and anxious anticipation, even dread, contribute to a powerful package that gets called love. Actually, it’s anything

but. Still, it’s what all the songs tell us love is. The ‘I can’t live without you, baby’ stuff. Hardly anyone writes songs

about how easy and comfortable a healthy love relationship is. They’re all writing about fear and pain and loss and

heartache. So we call that love, and we don’t know what to do when something comes along that isn’t crazy. We

begin to relax and then we’re afraid it isn’t love, because we’re not obsessed.”

Trudi agrees. “Exactly. That’s exactly what happened. I didn’t start out calling it love because it was too

comfortable—and I wasn’t used to anything being comfortable, as you know.” She grins, and continues. “He just

grew on me over the months that we saw each other. I felt as if I could relax and be totally myself and he still

wouldn't go away. That alone was incredible. I'd never had someone not go away. We waited a long time before we

got sexually involved, actually got to know each other first as people. I liked him more and more, and being with

him was such a good, happy time for me. When we finally did go to bed together it was very tender, and I felt so

vulnerable. I cried a lot. I still do sometimes, but he doesn't seem to mind." Trudi lowers her gaze. "I guess there are

still a lot of painful memories that come up for me around sex, of being rejected and feeling so hurt." After a pause,

she adds, "As far as sex now, I'm more troubled than he is. He'd like it to be more exciting for both our sakes, but

he's really not complaining. I am, though, because I know how it could be."

"Okay," I respond, "tell me how it is between you and Hal now.

"He's in love with me. I can see it by the way he treats me. Whenever I meet a friend of his for the first time I can

tell Hal's already said wonderful things about me just by the way I'm greeted. And when we're alone, he is so

affectionate, so eager to make me happy. But I get stiff, cold, rigid almost. I cannot seem to really warm up to him. I

don't know what stops me . . ."

"What do you feel when you and Hal start to make love, Trudi?"

She sits quietly for a while, thinking. Then she looks up at me. "Afraid, maybe?" Then, answering herself, "Yes,

that's it. I'm scared, really scared!"

“Of ...” I prod.

More thoughtful silence. Finally she continues, “I’m not sure. Being known, somehow. Oh, that sounds so

Biblical. You know how they always talk about that in the Bible. ‘Then he knew her.’ That kind of thing. But

somehow I feel like, if I let him, Hal would really know me, not just sexually, but in other ways, too. I can’t seem to

surrender to him. It’s just too scary for me.”

I ask the obvious question. “What will happen if you do?”

“Oh, God, I don’t know.” Trudi starts to squirm in her chair. “I feel so vulnerable, so naked when I think about it.

I feel silly talking about sex this way, after all my exploits. But this is different, somehow. It’s not as easy to be

sexual with someone who really wants to be close to me in every way. I close up like a clam, or else go through the

motions while part of me is holding back. I’m acting like this shy virgin or something.”

“Trudi,” I reassure her, “when it comes to the kind of intimacy you and Hal already have, and what you can have

together in the future, you’re very much like a virgin. It’s all new, and you’re very inexperienced at this way of

being with a man, with anyone in fact. You *are* scared.”

“Well, that’s exactly how I feel—self—protective, as though I’m going to lose something very important,” she

agrees.

“Yes, and what you’re afraid of losing is all your armor, your protection against being really hurt. Even though

you threw yourself at men before this, you never really risked getting close to any one of them. You never had to

deal with being close because none of them could be close either. Now you’re with Hal, who’d like nothing better

than to be close in every way with you, and you are panicking. It’s fine when you’re talking and enjoying each

other’s company, but with sex, when every possible barrier between the two of you is removed, it’s different. With

your other partners, not even sex removed the barriers. In fact, it helped to keep them in place because you used sex

to avoid communicating about who you really were and how you really felt. So no matter how much sex you had,

you never really got any closer to knowing each other. Because you used sex once to control relationships, my guess

is that it is very hard for you to let go of that control, by being sexual rather than using sex as a tool.

“I like your phrase, Trudi—‘to be known’—because that is what your sexual sharing means now. You and Hal

have shared so much about yourselves already that sex has become a deepening of the way you know each other, not

an avoidance.”

Trudi’s eyes gleam with tears. “Why does it have to be this way? Why can’t I just relax? I know this man isn’t

going to hurt me deliberately. At least I don't think he is ..." When she hears her self-doubt, she quickly changes her

tack. "Okay, you're telling me I only know how to be sexy with someone who doesn't really want me, not all of me

anyway, and that I can't be sexy with someone like Hal, who is good and kind and thinks I'm wonderful, because

I'm afraid of the closeness. So what do I do?"

"The only way out is *through*. First of all, let go of the idea of 'being sexy' and allow yourself to just be sexual.

Being sexy is an act. Being sexual is relating intimately on a physical level. You'll need to tell Hal exactly what's

happening to you as it happens—all your feelings, no matter how irrational. Tell him when you're afraid, when you

need to back away, and when you're ready to let the closeness happen again. If you need to, take more control of the

lovemaking and go only as fast and as far as is comfortable for you. Hal will understand if you ask for his help with

your fears. And try not to judge anything that's happening to you. Love and trust are not areas you've had much

experience with till now. Be willing to go very slowly, and build your willingness to surrender. You know, Trudi, in

all that sex before, there was very little surrender, but there was a whole lot of managing and controlling someone

else, manipulating him through sex, and practicing lots of self-will. You were performing, hoping for rave reviews.

Look at what you did before and what you're trying to do now as the difference between playing the part of a great

lover and allowing yourself to be loved. Playing the part can be very exhilarating, especially when you've got your

audience's attention. Allowing yourself to be loved is much more difficult because it has to come from a very

private place, the place where you already love yourself. If there's lots of love already there, it's easier to accept that

you deserve another's love. If there's very little self-love, it's much harder to let love in that comes from outside

yourself. You've come a long way in loving yourself. Now you're at the next step: trusting enough to let yourself be

loved by this man."

Trudi reflects. "All that wild abandon I used to practice was actually very calculated. I can see that. There really

wasn't much letting go at all, even though it was an exciting performance. So now I have to stop trying and start just

being. Funny, how that's even harder. Being loved ..." Trudi muses. "I know I still have a long way to go with that

one. Sometimes I look at Hal and wonder how he can be so enchanted with me. I'm not sure there's anything that's

wonderful about me when I'm not putting on a great big, spectacular show." Trudi's eyes widen. "That's what has

made it so difficult for me, right? Not having to put on that show. Not having to do much of anything special. Not

having to try. I've been afraid to be loving to Hal because I was sure I didn't know how. I thought that unless I went

into my seductive routine whatever I did with him wouldn't be enough and he'd be bored. I couldn't use the

seductive act because we were such good friends before we became lovers that it was totally inappropriate for me to

suddenly start breathing heavily and throwing myself at him. Plus it wasn't necessary. He already was very

interested without my doing any of that.

"It's just like the rest of what we have together. The whole thing is so much easier than I ever thought love could

be. Just being myself is enough!" Trudi stops, and then she looks at me sheepishly. "Do you see this kind of thing

happening all the time?" she asks.

"Not nearly as often as I'd like," I reply. "What you are struggling with now is only an issue for a woman who's

really recovered from loving too much ... and most women do not recover. They spend their time, their energy, their

lives, using their sexuality as a tool, in trying to change someone who's not able to love them into someone who is.

It never works, but it's safe, because as long as they're all wrapped up in the struggle, they never have to deal with

real intimacy, with letting another human being know them in the deepest sense. Most people are so frightened of

that. So while their loneliness drives them toward relationships, their fear causes them to choose people with whom

it won't ever really work."

Trudi asks, "Has Hal done that with me? Chosen someone with whom he can't be close?"

"Maybe," I answer.

"So I'm now on the other end of this thing, being the one who resists being close. That's a switch."

"It happens a lot. We all have the ability to play both roles, you know. The pursuer, which is what you used to be,

or the distancer, which is what your partners used to be. Now, to some degree, you're the distancer, the one who is

fleeing from intimacy, and Hal is doing the pursuing. If you stopped running, it would be interesting to see what

would happen. You see, what will tend to stay the same through all this is the gap between you and another person.

You may trade roles, but the gap will remain constant."

"So no matter who is chasing and who is running away, neither person has to deal with being close," Trudi says.

Then, softly, cautiously, "It's not the sex, is it? It's the closeness that is so frightening. But I really think I want to

hold still, and let Hal catch up to me. It scares me and it feels threatening as hell, but I want to close the gap."

Trudi is talking about being willing to enter a state of being with another person that very few people ever

achieve. The need to avoid it is behind all the struggles in which women who love too much and men who love too

little engage. The positions of pursuer and distancer are reversible, but for two people to eliminate them completely

demands a rare courage. I give the only guidance I can offer for their journey.

“Well, I suggest that you talk about all this with Hal. And don’t stop talking when you two are in bed together.

Let him know what you are going through. That’s a very important form of intimacy, you know. Stay very, very

honest and the rest will take care of itself.”

Trudi looks immensely relieved. “It helps so much to understand what’s been going on. I know you’re right, that

this is all new for me and I don’t know how to do it yet. Thinking that I should be just as wild as I used to be hasn’t

helped either. In fact, that’s caused more problems. But I already trust Hal with my heart and with my feelings. Now

I just need to trust him with my body.” She smiles, shaking her head. “None of this is easy, is it? But it’s all exactly

what has to happen. I’ll let you know how it goes ... and thanks.”

“My pleasure, Trudi,” I answer, meaning it with all my heart, and we hug goodbye.

To see how far Trudi has come in her recovery, we can compare her beliefs about herself and her style of relating in

an intimate relationship with the characteristics of a woman who has recovered from loving too much. Keep in mind

that recovery is a lifelong process and a goal toward which we strive, rather than one we achieve once and for all.

These are the characteristics of a woman who has recovered from loving too much.

1. She accepts herself fully, even while wanting to change parts of herself. There is a basic self-love and self-

regard, which she carefully nurtures and purposely expands.

2. She accepts others as they are without trying to change them to meet her needs.

3. She is in touch with her feelings and attitudes about every aspect of her life, including her sexuality.

4. She cherishes every aspect of herself: her personality, her appearance, her beliefs and values, her body her

interests and accomplishments. She validates herself, rather than searching for a relationship to give her a

sense of self-worth.

5. Her self-esteem is great enough that she can enjoy being with others, especially men, who are fine just as

they are. She does not need to be needed in order to feel worthy.

6. She allows herself to be open and trusting with *appropriate* people. She is not afraid to be known at a deeply

personal level, but she also does not expose herself to the exploitation of those who are not interested in her

well-being.

7. She questions, "Is this relationship good for me? Does it enable me to grow into all I am capable of being?"

8. When a relationship is destructive, she is able to let go of it without experiencing disabling depression. She

has a circle of supportive friends and healthy interests to see her through crises.

9. She values her own serenity above all else. All the struggles, drama, and chaos of the past have lost their

appeal. She is protective of herself, her health, and her well-being.

10. She knows that a relationship, in order to work, must be between partners who share similar values,

interests, and goals, and who each have a capacity for intimacy. She also knows that she is worthy of the best

that life has to offer.

There are several phases in recovering from loving too much. The first phase begins when we realize what we are

doing and wish we could stop. Next comes our willingness to get help for ourselves, followed by our actual initial

attempt to secure help. After that, we enter the phase of recovery that requires our commitment to our own healing

and our willingness to continue with our recovery program. During this period we begin to change how we act,

think, and feel. What once felt normal and familiar begins to feel uncomfortable and unhealthy. We enter the next

phase of recovery when we start making choices that no longer follow our old patterns but enhance our lives and

promote our well-being instead. Throughout the stages of recovery, self-love grows slowly and steadily. First we

stop hating ourselves, then we become more tolerant of ourselves. Next, there is a burgeoning appreciation of our

good qualities, and then self-acceptance develops. Finally, genuine self-love evolves.

Unless we have self-acceptance and self-love, we cannot tolerate being “known,” as Trudi so aptly put it, because

without these feelings we cannot believe we are worth loving just as we are. Instead, we try to earn love through

giving it to another, through being nurturing and patient, through suffering and sacrifice, through providing exciting

sex or wonderful cooking or whatever.

Once the self-acceptance and self-love begin to develop and take hold, we are then ready to consciously practice

simply being ourselves without trying to please, without performing in certain ways calculated to gain another’s

approval and love. But stopping the performances and letting go of the act, while a relief, can also be frightening.

Awkwardness and a feeling of great vulnerability come over us when we are just being rather than doing. As we

struggle to believe that we are worthy, *just as we are*, of the love of someone important to us, the temptation will

always be there to put on at least a bit of an act for him, and yet if the recovery process has progressed there will

also be an unwillingness to go back into the old behaviors and old manipulations. This is the crossroads Trudi faces

now: no longer able to employ her old style of relating sexually but frightened to go forward into a more genuine,

less controlled (all that wild abandon having been a most controlled performance) mode of sexual experience. To

stop performing feels at first like being frozen. When we are no longer willing to make the moves calculated to

produce an effect, there is a period of time during which we suffer from not knowing what to do until our genuine

loving impulses have a chance to be heard and felt and to assert themselves.

Letting go of the old stratagems does not mean we never approach, never love, never nurture, never help, never

soothe nor stimulate nor seduce our partner. But with recovery, we relate to another person as an expression of our

own essence, rather than because we are trying to elicit a response or create an effect or produce a change in him.

What we have to offer instead is who we genuinely are when we are not hiding or calculating, when we are

undisguised and unvarnished.

First we must overcome our fear of being rejected if we allow someone to truly see us, truly know us. Then we

must learn not to panic when all our emotional boundary lines are no longer in place, surrounding and protecting us.

In the sexual realm, this new quality of relating requires not only that we be naked and vulnerable physically, but

that we be emotionally and spiritually naked and vulnerable as well.

No wonder this degree of connecting between two individuals is so very rare. Our terror is that without those

boundaries we will dissolve.

What makes the risk worthwhile? Only when we truly reveal ourselves can we ever be truly loved. When we

relate as we genuinely are, from our essence, then if we are loved it is our essence that is loved. Nothing is more

validating on a personal level and more freeing in a relationship. It must be noted, however, that this kind of

behavior on our part is only possible in a climate that is free of fear, so we must not only conquer our own fears of

being genuine but also avoid people whose attitudes and behaviors toward us produce fear. No matter how willing to

be genuine you become with recovery, there will still be people whose anger, hostility, and aggression will inhibit

you from being honest. To be vulnerable with them is to be masochistic. Therefore, lowering our boundaries and

eventually eliminating them should happen only with those people—friends, relatives, or lovers—with whom we

have a relationship bathed in trust, love, respect, and reverence for our shared, tender humanity.

What frequently happens with recovery is that as our patterns of relating change, so do our circles of friends as

well as our intimate relationships. We change in how we relate to our parents and to our children. With our parents

we become less needy and less angry, and often less ingratiating as well. We become much more honest, often more

tolerant, and sometimes more genuinely loving. With our children we become less controlling, less worried, and less

guilty. We relax and enjoy them more because we are able to relax and enjoy ourselves more. We feel more freedom

to pursue our own needs and interests, and this frees them to do the same.

Friends with whom we could once commiserate endlessly may now strike us as obsessed and unhealthy, and

while we may offer to share what has been helpful for us, we will not allow ourselves to carry the burden of their

troubles. Mutual misery as a criterion for friendship is replaced by more rewarding mutual interests.

In short, recovery will change your life in more ways than I can predict for you on these pages, and sometimes

that will be uncomfortable. Don't let the discomfort stop you. The fear of change, of relinquishing what we've

always known and done and been, is what holds us back from our metamorphosis into a healthier, higher, more truly

loving self.

It is not the pain that holds us back. We're already enduring alarming levels of pain with no prospect of relief

unless we change. What holds us back is the fear, fear of the unknown. The best way I know to confront and combat

fear is to join forces with fellow travelers who are on the same journey. Find a support group of those others who

have been where you are and who are headed for or have already arrived at the destination you want to reach. Join them on the path toward a new way of living.

Appendix 1

How to Start Your Own Support Group

First, learn what resources are already available in the area you live in. Often communities have a directory and/or a

website listing all service agencies and sources of help. If you don't know whether such a list exists or how to find

it, call your library or your community crisis hotline. (Also, see the Sources of Help section, Appendix 2, for a

listing of national organizations. You can call, visit them online, or write to them and they will advise you regarding

local service agencies.) Even if there is no such publication, your community hotline should be able to give you the

names of various counseling agencies and self-help groups that may be appropriate for you. In addition, most

telephone directories now include a "human services" listing, so you can check that as well.

Do not, however, assume that one visit to a website, one phone call to one agency or professional will result in all

the information you need to have. It is difficult for any professional in a large community to stay in touch with all

the resources that the area has to offer, and unfortunately many professionals are woefully uninformed about what is

currently available.

Do your own homework. Make all the calls you need to, anonymously if you wish. See if the group you need

already exists. There's no point reinventing the wheel or going into competition with a group that is already

functioning and could use your involvement. If you are a candidate for Overeaters Anonymous or Al-Anon or

Shelter Services groups for battered women or Rape Crisis groups for rape survivors, be willing to take some time

and go to some trouble, maybe travel some distance to attend the meetings they offer. It will be worth it to you.

If, after diligent searching,[2](#) you are quite certain that the group you need doesn't exist, start one yourself.

Probably the best way to begin is to run an ad in the Personals section of your newspaper. It might go something

like this:

WOMEN: Has falling in love meant being in emotional pain sooner or later?
A free self-help group is now

forming for women whose relationships with men have, up to now, usually been destructive. If you want to

overcome this problem, call [your first name and phone number] for information and location of meeting.

You should be able to fill a group by running such an ad just a few times. Your group ideally would have about

seven to twelve members, but start with fewer if necessary.

Remember, at that first meeting the women who show up are there because this is a serious problem for them and

they are looking for help. Don't spend too much of the meeting time talking about how to organize future meetings,

even though that, too, is important. The best way to start is to share your stories, because doing so will forge an

immediate bond and a sense of belonging. Women who love too much are much more alike than different, and that

will be felt by all of you. So make sharing your stories your first priority.

Try this agenda for your first meeting, which should last no more than an hour.

1. Start on time. This lets everyone involved know that they must be prompt for future meetings.

2. Introduce yourself as the person who ran the ad and explain that you would like the group to develop into a

continuing source of support for yourself and everyone present.

3. Emphasize that everything that is said during the meeting is to remain in the meeting, that no one who is seen

there or anything that is said there should be discussed elsewhere, *ever*. Suggest that those present simply use

their first names to introduce themselves.

4. Explain that it would probably help everyone there to hear one another's reasons for coming to the group and

that perhaps each person could talk for up to five minutes about what made her decide to come. Emphasize

that no one has to talk for that much time but that it is available to each person should she want it. Volunteer

to begin by giving your first name and telling your own story briefly.

5. When everyone who wants to has shared her story, go back to any who did not want to talk when it was their

turn, and gently ask if they would like to now. Do not pressure anyone to speak. Make it very clear that each

woman is welcome whether or not she is ready to talk about her situation yet.

6. Now talk about some of the guidelines that you would like to see the group follow. I recommend the

following, which should be copied down and given to each participant:

- No advice giving. All are welcome to share their experiences and what has worked to help them feel

better, but no one should advise another as to what she should do. Advice giving should be gently

pointed out if anyone indulges in it.

- Leadership should rotate within the group weekly, each meeting led by a different member. It is the

leader's responsibility to start the meeting on time, to pick a topic to be discussed, to save a few

minutes at the end for any business matters, and to choose another leader for the following week

before she closes the meeting.

- Meetings should last a specific length of time. I recommend one hour. No one is going to solve all

her problems in one meeting and it is important not to try. Meetings should start promptly and end

on time. (It is better that they be too short than too long. Members can decide to lengthen the

meeting if they wish, later on.)

- The meeting place should be a neutral setting rather than someone's home, if at all possible. Homes

are full of distractions : children, telephone calls, and lack of privacy for the group members,

especially the hostess. Moreover, the role of hostess should be avoided. You are not entertaining

each other socially; you are working together as peers to recover from your common problems.

Many banks, savings and loans offices, other businesses, and churches make rooms available free

of charge to groups for meetings in the evening hours.

- No eating, smoking, or drinking any beverages while your meeting is in progress: these all serve to

distract from the business at hand. Such things may be made available before and after the meeting

if your group decides that this is important. *Never* provide alcohol. It distorts people's feelings and

reactions and impedes the work to be done.

- Avoid talking about “him.” This is *very* important. Group members must learn to focus on

themselves and their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, rather than on the man who is their

obsession. Some talking about him is inevitable at first, but each person as she shares should strive

to keep this to the strictest minimum.

- No one should be criticized about what she does or does not do, either when she is present or when

she is absent from the group. Although members are free to ask for feedback from each other, this

should never be given unsolicited. Like advice, criticism has no place in a support group.

Stick to the topic at hand. Virtually any topic a leader wants to introduce is fine except anything

having to do with religion, politics, or outside issues such as current events, celebrities, any causes,

treatment programs, or therapeutic modalities. There is no room for debate or divisiveness in a

support group. And remember, you are not meeting to gripe about men. You are interested in your

own growth and healing, in sharing how you are developing new tools for coping with old

problems. Below are some topic suggestions :

Why I need this group

Guilt and resentment

My worst fears

What I like best about myself and what I like least

How I take care of myself and meet my own needs

Loneliness

How I cope with depression

My sexual attitudes: what they are and where they come from

Anger: how I handle my own and others'

How I relate to men

What I think people think of me

Examining my motives

My responsibilities to myself; my responsibilities to others

My spirituality (this is *not* a discussion of religious beliefs but of how each group member

experiences her own spiritual dimension or doesn't)

Letting go of blame, including self-blame

Patterns in my life

It is recommended that group members read *Women Who Love Too Much*, but this is *not* a requirement,

only a suggestion.

The group may decide to add an extra fifteen minutes on to the meeting time once a month to deal with

business matters or changes in format, how well the guidelines are working, or any other problems.

Now, back to the suggested format for the first meeting:

7. Discuss the list of guidelines together as a group.
8. Ask if someone would be willing to lead the group the following week.
9. Ascertain where the group will meet the following week and decide on the issue of refreshments before or after the meeting.
10. Discuss whether more women should be invited to join your group, whether to run the ad one more week, or whether the women present might invite other women.
11. Close the meeting by standing silently in a circle, holding hands with eyes closed for a few moments.

A final word regarding these guidelines: The principles of confidentiality, rotation of leadership, no criticism, no

advice-giving, no discussions of controversial subjects or outside issues, no debating, and so on are all very

important to group harmony and cohesion. Do not violate these principles in the interest of pleasing a group

member. What is best for the group as a whole must always be considered first.

With this in mind, you have the basic tools for starting a group for women who love too much. Do not

underestimate how very healing this simple hour's meeting of personal sharing will come to be in all your lives.

Together you are offering each other the opportunity to recover. Good luck!

Appendix 2

Sources of Help

When you are looking for help, it is often difficult to know the names for the agencies and programs you need. For

instance, if your husband is battering you, and you are ready to talk to someone who understands but don't know

that the agency for dealing with your situation is listed under Shelter Services for Women, you may feel frustrated

and helpless. Therefore, this list is prepared to aid you in knowing where to look when you are ready to go for help.

All these resources have websites as well as phone numbers to call and addresses to which you can write.

A good way to begin is to call your local hotline if your area has one. You can find that number by calling

Information or by looking in your phone book in the section listing community services. Sometimes this information

is listed in the blue pages that divide the directory's personal and business numbers; sometimes it is in the

information section at the beginning of the white pages. You may also call your local library and ask if there is a

publication that lists community resources. This is an excellent source of information about what counseling

services and self-help groups exist in your area. Also, most agencies offering help to the community know about

other sources of help, so sometimes one call to one agency, even if it isn't the right one, will start you in the

direction of finding the help you need.

If all else fails, you may want to call, write, or look up online these national offices for information about what is

available in your community:

A.A. World Services, Inc. (Alcoholics Anonymous)

P.O. Box 459

New York, NY 10163

(212) 870-3400

www.alcoholicsanonymous.org

Alcoholics Anonymous is listed in nearly every telephone directory in the United States and in many countries

abroad as well, so getting in touch with this organization should be very easy. It is the most effective and successful

program of help for those with a serious desire to stop drinking. It is also an excellent source of accurate information

about the disease of alcoholism. Call or visit your A.A. central office for a directory of local meetings or to obtain

their free literature or to talk to someone in the program. *All Twelve-Step meetings are free although most who*

attend drop a dollar in the basket when it is passed.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc.,

World Service Office

1600 Corporate Landing Parkway

Virginia Beach, VA 23454-5617

(757) 563-1600

Toll free call (888) 4-AL-ANON/(888) 425-2666

www.al-anon.org

Based on the principles of A.A., Al-Anon is for the families and friends of alcoholics. Al-Anon is usually listed in

the phone book or in the Personals section of the newspaper as Al-Anon Family Groups. If there is no listing, call

A.A. Central Office and ask for Al-Anon's number, or ask to talk to a member of A.A. who can put you in touch

with someone in Al-Anon. The meetings and literature are an invaluable source of help. Free.

Cocaine Anonymous

3740 Overland Ave., Suite C

Los Angeles, CA 90034-6337

or P.O. Box 492000

Los Angeles, CA 90049-8000

(310) 559-5833

(800) 347-8998 (This number refers callers to local meetings

in the area.)

www.ca.org

Cocaine Anonymous is a Twelve-Step program of recovery for those addicted to cocaine. It follows the principles

of A.A. adapted for cocaine abusers. Free.

Co-Dependents Anonymous

P.O. Box 33577

Phoenix, AZ 85067-3577

(602) 277-7991

www.codependents.org

Co-Dependents Anonymous, or CoDA, applies the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of A.A. to people with a

history, usually beginning in childhood, of troubled relationships. Most often these relationships are with chemically

dependent persons. Free.

Debtors Anonymous

P.O. Box 920888

Needham, MA 02492-0009

(781) 453-2743

www.debtorsanonymous.org

Debtors Anonymous is a Twelve-Step program of recovery based on the principles of A.A. adapted for those who

are compulsive debtors. Many women who love too much also spend too much and need the help this program has

to offer. Free.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

(800) 799-SAFE (7233)

www.ndvh.org

The above hotline can put you in touch with support services in your area. Local shelter services offer refuge for

battered women and their children as well as ongoing support groups and a domestic violence hotline. Usually

staffed in part by volunteers who have themselves been victims of domestic violence, these shelters are an excellent

source of help for the woman who is being physically abused. Look in your phone book under Shelter Services, use

your local community information directory, or call the district attorney's office or the Legal Aid office for the

number. If there are no shelter services in your community, you might consider trying Al-Anon. Eighty percent of

those who batter their wives and/or children abuse alcohol, and their violent episodes are related to their drinking.

Al-Anon has a great deal to offer victims of domestic violence whose partners are alcoholic.

Gamblers Anonymous

P.O. Box 17173

Los Angeles, CA 90017

(213) 386-8789

www.gamblersanonymous.org

Gamblers Anonymous applies A.A.'s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions to compulsive gambling. Free.

Gam-Anon International Service Office

P.O. Box 157

Whitestone, NY 11357

(718) 352-1671

www.gam-anon.org

Gam-Anon basically follows Al-Anon's guidelines as adapted for the families and friends of compulsive

gamblers. It is a Twelve-Step program of recovery. Free.

Narcotics Anonymous World Service Office

P.O. Box 9999

Van Nuys, CA 91409

(818) 773-9999

www.na.org

Also based on the principles of A.A., Narcotics Anonymous offers help to those who abuse drugs other than

alcohol. Although alcoholics and addicts used to be separate populations, this has not been the case for the last two

generations. Most young people who are addictive are polydrug abusers. N.A. meetings thus tend to have a

somewhat younger population than A.A. meetings. N.A. is a great source of help to the addict and provides valuable

information to the co-addict on the nature of drug addiction and the steps necessary for recovery. Free.

Overeaters Anonymous World Service Office

P.O. Box 44020

Rio Rancho, NM 87124-4020

(505) 891-2664

www.oa.org

Based on the principles of A.A., O.A. provides a support group for men and women whose eating is out of

control. Not another diet, O.A. teaches how to eat without starving or bingeing, one day at a time. It is usually listed

in the phone book or the personals section of your newspaper or with your hotline. You may call or write the above

listing for a schedule of meetings in your area. Free.

Parents United

615 15th Street

Modesto, CA 95354-2510

(209) 572-3446

http://members.tripod.com/~Parents_United/Chapters/PUI.htm

Parents United provides help for families in which a parent has been the aggressor in an incestuous involvement

as well as for those who have been victims of sexual advances by parents or other trusted adults or family members.

By calling, writing to the above address, or going online you can obtain a listing of the areas in which Parents

United chapters exist.

RAINN

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network

(800) 656-4673

www.rainn.org

Dialing this number will put you in touch with the nearest source of help whether the problem is rape, incest, or

any other kind of physical or sexual abuse. Making this call is appropriate whether the violation occurred ten

minutes ago or twenty years before. Women who have been violated in any of these ways tend to feel that they do

not deserve to be loved and may, from this experience alone, become women who love too much.

Free information and support services are usually provided by volunteers who have themselves been sexually

abused. Sometimes a nominal fee or a sliding-scale fee is charged for ongoing support group involvement.

Resources vary widely in different areas.

Sexaholics Anonymous International Central Office

P.O. Box 3565

Brentwood, TN 37024

(615) 370-6062

TOLL FREE (866) 424-8777

www.sa.org

Based on the Twelve-Step approach of A.A., this group is for sexual compulsives. Free.

Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.

650 J Street, Suite 205

Lincoln, NE 68508

(800) 735-0329

www.stepfam.org

www.saafamilies.org

The national Stepfamily Association provides information about local chapters and issues a newsletter, while

local chapters offer classes, workshops, and support groups for blended families. Membership in the association

provides an excellent way for these families to find each other and form support networks for dealing with the

problems and feelings unique to their situation. Fee for membership. Some classes, workshops, and services are free.

Stepfamily Foundation

333 West End Avenue

New York, NY 10023

(212) 877-3244

www.stepfamily.org

This group provides telephone counseling to those needing help with the challenges inherent in the stepfamily,

and offers a comprehensive information packet for a fee. Membership is \$70 a year.

Appendix 3

Suggested Reading

When I was a therapist I frequently found myself recommending that my clients read one or several of the books

listed below. I am also recommending these books to you. In no way is this short list intended to be inclusive of all

the books that might be of help to you. It does, however, include some of my favorites. Most are available in recent

editions.

Codependent No More, by Melody Beattie

Minneapolis: Hazelden, 1987

This is a woman who thoroughly understands addiction. Her take on relationships is invaluable. Any book by Ms.

Beattie.

How to Survive the Loss of a Love, by Melba Colgrove and others Scarsdale, NY: Lion Press, 1976 (distributed by

Simon & Schuster)

Since women who love too much are often left broken-hearted by their men, this handy little booklet can help you

pick up the pieces and go on—at least until you learn not to fall for men who can't love you back.

The Art of Selfishness, by David Seabury

New York: Pocket Books, 1981

Written in a charmingly British style and with strong spiritual overtones but no preaching, this is a good textbook

on how to become selfish in a healthy way—a lesson every woman who loves too much needs to learn.

Mega-Nutrients for Your Nerves, by H. L. Newbold

P. H. Wyden, 1975

A highly readable source of information about the physiological and biochemical factors that contribute to

endogenous depression. Two cautions regarding this book: It contains some misleading information about

alcoholism, and it also advises self-testing for vitamin and mineral deficiencies, which is a very confusing process.

Consult an orthomolecular specialist for help with this. Newbold provides information on how to contact these

specialists.

I'll Quit Tomorrow, by Vernon Johnson

New York: Harper & Row, 1973

An excellent work on the progression of the disease of alcoholism. The intervention process, by which many

alcoholics have been helped to seek treatment for their disease, was created by Vernon Johnson, and this book

explains the technique. Very readable and informative.

It Will Never Happen to Me! by Claudia Black

M.A.C., 1981

So many women who love too much are adult children of alcoholic parents. Ms. Black, in this classic work,

describes the effects of living in an alcoholic family, both in childhood and later in adulthood. A must for all who

grew up with alcoholism in a parent or caretaker.

Betrayal of Innocence: Incest and Its Devastation, by Susan Forward and Craig Buck

Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1978

A good introductory book on the subject of incest for those who have been victims of sexual abuse by a parent or

family member or other trusted adult.

The Dynamic Laws of Prosperity, by Catherine Ponder

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962

This is one of my favorite books on metaphysics, with basic spiritual lessons that are timeless. Though it has a

definite '50s flavor, the basic spiritual lessons are timeless. Contains many, many positive and healing affirmations.

Through their use you can begin to believe that you *deserve* a wonderful life!

The Game of Life and How to Play It, by Florence Scovell Shinn

Rickard, 1941

This short masterpiece on metaphysics gives you guidelines for living life successfully. If you don't have a

spiritual practice and you wish you did, this book may be a good place to start. On the other hand, a full appreciation

of Mrs. Shinn's work requires a good deal of spiritual development.

Appendix 4

Affirmations

I will start with an affirmation that addresses what is both most important and also most difficult to do, for some

women who love too much. Twice daily, for three minutes each time, maintain eye contact with yourself in a mirror

as you *say out loud*, "[your name], I love you and accept you exactly the way you are."

This is also an excellent affirmation to repeat out loud to yourself while you are in your car alone driving, or

silently whenever you are feeling self-critical. One cannot hold two thoughts at the same time, so replace your

negative statements about yourself, such as "How could I be so dumb?" or "I'll never get this right," with positive

affirmations. Repeated diligently, positive affirmations actually have the power to cancel out destructive thoughts

and feelings, even when the negativity has been going on for years.

Other affirmations that are short and easy to remember, and which can be used in the time you spend driving,

exercising, waiting, or simply holding still, follow:

I am free of pain, anger, and fear.

I enjoy perfect peace and well-being.

In every aspect of my life I am guided to my highest happiness and fulfillment.

All problems and struggles now fade away: I am serene.

The perfect solution for every problem now manifests.

I am free and filled with light.

If you have a belief in God or a higher power, make that belief an important part of your affirmations:

God loves me.

God blesses me.

God is working in my life.

The serenity prayer is one of the best affirmations possible when said thus:

God grant me Serenity

To accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

and Wisdom to know the difference.

(Remember, you cannot change others; you can change yourself.)

If you do not have a belief in God you may be more comfortable with an affirmation like the following:

All things are possible through love.

Love is working in me to heal me and strengthen me,

To calm me and guide me to peace.

It is important that you also make up your own affirmations. Those that feel and sound exactly right to you will

work best for you, so practice some of the ones listed here until you are ready to design your own 100-percent

positive, unconditional, fully validating affirmations, tailor-made by you, for you. Do not create affirmations such as

“Everything works out perfectly between Tom and me and we get married.” The “and we get married” may not be

the perfect solution for whatever goes on between you and Tom. Leave it at “Everything works out perfectly,”

maybe adding “for my highest good.” Stay away from demanding specific results. Simply affirm yourself, your life,

your worth, and your wonderful future. When you make affirmations, you are programming your unconscious to

become willing to let go of the old patterns and move into new, healthy, joyous, and prosperous ways of living. In

fact, that’s not bad as an affirmation:

I release all the pain of the past and welcome the

health, joy, and success that are mine to claim.

See how it's done? Okay, here's some room, for your own creations.

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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

WHY ME?
WHY THIS?
WHY NOW?

A GUIDE TO ANSWERING
LIFE'S TOUGHEST QUESTIONS

Robin Norwood

author of *Women Who Love Too Much*

If you enjoyed this book from Tarcher/Penguin, then
check out . . .

Why Me, Why This, Why Now?

by Robin Norwood

ISBN: 9780399165832

Turn the page for an excerpt of

Attached

by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this book we have distilled years of adult romantic attachment research
into a practical

guide for the reader who wishes to find a good relationship or improve his or
her existing

one. Attachment theory is a vast and complex field of research that pertains
to child

development and parenting as well as to romantic relationships. In this book
we limit

ourselves to romantic attachment and romantic relationships.

In writing this book we set out to transform complex academic ideas into a
useful

practical resource for everyday life. We refer to several researchers along the
way, but

inevitably we could not mention many others. We are forever indebted to the
wonderful

work of countless creative minds in this field, and we regret that we were not able to

mention them all.

INTRODUCTION



The New Science of Adult Attachment

1.

Decoding Relationship Behavior

Only two weeks into dating this guy and already I'm making myself miserable worrying that he doesn't find me attractive enough and obsessing about whether or not he's going to call! I know that once again I'll manage to turn all my fears about not being good enough into a self-fulfilling prophecy and ruin yet another chance at a relationship!

What's wrong with me? I'm a smart, good-looking guy with a successful career. I have a lot to offer. I've dated some terrific women, but inevitably, after a few weeks I lose interest and start to feel trapped. It shouldn't be this hard to find someone I'm compatible with.

I've been married to my husband for years and yet feel completely alone. He was never one to discuss his emotions or talk about the relationship, but things have gone from bad to worse. He stays at work late almost every weeknight and on weekends he's either at the golf course with friends or watching the sports channel on TV. There's just nothing to keep us together. Maybe I'd be better off alone.

Each of these problems is deeply painful, touching upon the innermost core of people's

lives. And yet no one explanation or solution fits the bill. Each case seems unique and

personal; each stems from an endless number of possible root causes. Deciphering them

would require a deep acquaintance with all the people involved. Past history, previous

relationships, and personality type are just a few of the avenues that a therapist would

need to pursue. This, at least, is what we, as clinicians in the field of mental health, were

taught and believed, until we made a new discovery—one that provided a straightforward

explanation for *all* three problems described above and many more. The story of this

discovery, and what came after it, is what this book is about.

IS LOVE ENOUGH?

A few years ago, our close friend Tamara started dating someone new:

I first noticed Greg at a cocktail party at a friend's house. He was unbelievably good-

looking, and I found the fact that I caught his eye very flattering. A few days later we

went out for dinner with some other people, and I couldn't resist the glimmer of

excitement in his eyes when he looked at me. But what I found most enticing were his

words and an implicit promise of togetherness that he conveyed. The promise of not

being alone. He said things like “Tamara, you don’t have to be home all by yourself, you

can come and work over at my place,” “You can call me any time you like.” There was

comfort in these statements: The comfort of belonging to someone, of not being alone in

the world. If I’d only listened carefully, I could have easily heard another message that

was incongruent with this promise, a message that made it clear that Greg feared getting

too close and was uncomfortable with commitment. Several times he’d mentioned that

he’d never had a stable relationship—that for some reason he always grew tired of his

girlfriends and felt the need to move on.

Though I could identify these issues as potentially problematic, at the time I didn’t

know how to correctly gauge their implications. All I had to guide me was the common

belief that many of us grow up with: The belief that love conquers all. And so I let love

conquer me. Nothing was more important to me than being with him. Yet at the same time

the other messages persisted about his inability to commit. I shrugged them off, confident

that with me, things would be different. Of course, I was wrong. As we got closer, his

messages got more erratic and everything started to fall apart; he began telling me that

he was too busy to meet on this night or that. Sometimes he'd claim that his entire work

week looked "crazy" and would ask if we could just meet on the weekend. I'd agree, but

inside I had a sinking feeling something was wrong, but what?

From then on I was always anxious. I was preoccupied with his whereabouts and

became hypersensitive to anything that could possibly imply that he wanted to break up.

But while Greg's behavior presented me with ample evidence of his dissatisfaction, he

interspersed pushing me away with just enough affection and apologies to keep me from

breaking up with him.

After a while, the ups and downs started to take a toll and I could no longer control

my emotions. I didn't know how to act, and despite my better judgment, I'd avoid making

plans with friends in case he called. I completely lost interest in everything else that was

important to me. Before long the relationship couldn't withstand the strain and

everything soon came to a screeching halt.

As friends, we were happy at first to see Tamara meet someone new that she was excited

about, but as the relationship unfolded, we became increasingly concerned over her

growing preoccupation with Greg. Her vitality gave way to anxiousness and insecurity.

Most of the time she was either waiting for a call from Greg or too worried and

preoccupied about the relationship to enjoy spending time with us as she had done in the

past. It became apparent that her work was also suffering, and she expressed some

concern that she might lose her job. We had always considered Tamara to be an

extremely well-rounded, resilient person, and we were starting to wonder if we were

mistaken about her strength. Although Tamara could point out Greg's history of being

unable to maintain a serious relationship and his unpredictability, and even acknowledged

that she would probably be happier without him, she was not able to muster the strength

to leave.

As experienced mental-health professionals, we had a hard time accepting that a

sophisticated, intelligent woman like Tamara had so derailed from her usual self. Why

was such a successful woman acting in such a helpless way? Why would somebody

whom we've known to be so adaptive to most of life's challenges become powerless in

this one? The other end of the equation was equally puzzling. Why would Greg send out

such mixed messages, although it was clear, even to us, that he *did* love her? There were

many possible complex psychological answers to these questions, but a surprisingly

simple yet far-reaching insight into the situation came from an unexpected source.

FROM THE THERAPEUTIC NURSERY TO A

PRACTICAL SCIENCE OF ADULT LOVE

At about the same time that Tamara was dating Greg, Amir was working part-time in the

Therapeutic Nursery at Columbia University. Here, he used attachment-guided therapy to

help mothers create a more secure bond with their children. The powerful effect that

attachment-guided treatment had on the relationship between mother and child

encouraged Amir to deepen his knowledge of attachment theory. This eventually led him

to fascinating reading material: research findings first made by Cindy Hazan and Phillip

Shaver indicated that adults show patterns of attachment to their romantic partners similar

to the patterns of attachment of children with their parents. As he read more about adult

attachment, Amir began to notice attachment behavior in adults all around him. He

realized that this kind of insight could have astounding implications for everyday life and

could help many people in their romantic relationships.

The first thing Amir did, once he realized the far-reaching implications of attachment

theory for adult relationships, was to call his longtime friend Rachel. He described to her

how effectively attachment theory explained the range of behaviors in adult relationships,

and asked her to help him transform the academic studies and scientific data he'd been

reading into practical guidelines and advice that people could use to actually change the

course of their lives. And that's how this book came to be.

THE SECURE, THE ANXIOUS, AND THE AVOIDANT

Adult attachment designates three main “attachment styles,” or manners in which people

perceive and respond to intimacy in romantic relationships, which parallel those found in

children: Secure, Anxious, and Avoidant. Basically, *secure* people feel comfortable with

intimacy and are usually warm and loving; *anxious* people crave intimacy, are often

preoccupied with their relationships, and tend to worry about their partner’s ability to

love them back; *avoidant* people equate intimacy with a loss of independence and

constantly try to minimize closeness. In addition, people with each of these attachment

styles differ in:

their view of intimacy and togetherness

the way they deal with conflict

their attitude toward sex

their ability to communicate their wishes and needs

their expectations from their partner and the relationship

All people in our society, whether they have just started dating someone or have been

married for forty years, fall into one of these categories, or, more rarely, into a

combination of the latter two (anxious and avoidant). Just over 50 percent are secure,

around 20 percent are anxious, 25 percent are avoidant, and the remaining 3 to 5 percent

fall into the fourth, less common category (combination anxious and avoidant).

Adult attachment research has produced hundreds of scientific papers and dozens of

books that carefully delineate the way in which adults behave in close romantic ties.

These studies have confirmed, many times over, the existence of these attachment styles

in adults in a wide range of countries and cultures.

Understanding attachment styles is an easy and reliable way to understand and predict

people's behavior in any romantic situation. In fact, one of the main messages of this

theory is that in romantic situations, we are programmed to act in a *predetermined*

manner.

Where Do Attachment Styles Come From?

Initially it was assumed that adult attachment styles were primarily a product of your upbringing. Thus, it was hypothesized that your current attachment style is determined by the way in which you were cared for

as a baby: If your parents were sensitive, available, and responsive, you should have a secure attachment style; if they were inconsistently responsive, you should develop an anxious attachment style; and if they were distant, rigid, and unresponsive, you should develop an avoidant attachment style. Today, however, we know that attachment styles in adulthood are influenced by a variety of factors, one of which is the way our parents cared for us, but other factors also come into play, including our life experiences. For more, see chapter 7.

TAMARA AND GREG: A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

We revisited our friend Tamara's story, and saw it in an entirely new light now.

Attachment research contained a prototype of Greg—who had an avoidant attachment

style—accurate down to the last detail. It summarized how he thought, behaved, and

reacted to the world. It predicted his distancing, his finding fault in Tamara, his initiating

fight that set back any progress in their relationship, and his enormous difficulty in

saying “I love you.” Intriguingly, the research findings explained that though he wanted

to be close to her, he felt compelled to push her away—not because he wasn't “into her”

or because he thought “she’s not good enough” (as Tamara had concluded).
On the

contrary, he pushed her away because he felt the closeness and intimacy
increasing.

As it also turned out, Tamara wasn’t unique either. The theory explained her
behaviors, thoughts, and reactions, typical for someone with an anxious
attachment style,

with surprising precision as well. It foresaw her increasing clinginess in the
face of his

distancing; it predicted her inability to concentrate at work, her constant
thoughts about

the relationship, and her oversensitivity to everything Greg did. It also
predicted that even

though she decided to break up with him, she could never muster up the
courage to do so.

It showed why, against her better judgment and the advice of close friends,
she would do

almost anything to try to be close to him. Most important, this theory
revealed why

Tamara and Greg found it so hard to get along even though they did indeed
love each

other. They spoke two different languages and exacerbated each other’s
natural

tendencies—hers to seek physical and emotional closeness and his to prefer
independence and shy away from intimacy. The accuracy with which the
theory

described the pair was uncanny. It was as though the researchers had been privy to the

couple's most intimate moments and personal thoughts. Psychological approaches can be

somewhat vague, leaving plenty of room for interpretation, but this theory managed to

provide precise, evidence-based insight into a seemingly one-of-a-kind relationship.

Although it's not impossible for someone to change his or her attachment style—on

average, one in four people do so over a four-year period—most people are unaware of

the issue, so these changes happen without their ever knowing they have occurred (or

why). Wouldn't it be great, we thought, if we could help people have some measure of

control over these life-altering shifts? What a difference it would make if they could

consciously work toward becoming more secure in their attachment styles instead of

letting life sway them every which way!

Learning about these three attachment styles was a true eye-opener for us; we

discovered that adult attachment behavior was everywhere. We were able to view our

own romantic behaviors and those of people around us in a fresh new light.
By assigning

attachment styles to patients, colleagues, and friends, we could interpret their
relationships differently and gain much more clarity. Their behavior no
longer seemed

baffling and complex, but rather predictable under the circumstances.

EVOLUTIONARY TIES

Attachment theory is based on the assertion that the need to be in a close
relationship is

embedded in our genes. It was John Bowlby's stroke of genius that brought
him to the

realization that we've been programmed by evolution to single out a few
specific

individuals in our lives and make them precious to us. We've been bred to be
dependent

on a significant other. The need starts in the womb and ends when we die.
Bowlby

proposed that throughout evolution, genetic selection favored people who
became

attached because it provided a survival advantage. In prehistoric times,
people who relied

only on themselves and had no one to protect them were more likely to end
up as prey.

More often than not, those who were with somebody who deeply cared
about them

survived to pass on to their offspring the preference to form intimate bonds. In fact, the

need to be near someone special is so important that the brain has a biological mechanism

specifically responsible for creating and regulating our connection with our attachment

figures (parents, children, and romantic partners). This mechanism, called the *attachment*

system, consists of emotions and behaviors that ensure that we remain safe and protected

by staying close to our loved ones. The mechanism explains why a child parted from his

or her mother becomes frantic, searches wildly, or cries uncontrollably until he or she

reestablishes contact with her. These reactions are coined *protest behavior*, and we all

still exhibit them as grown-ups. In prehistoric times, being close to a partner was a matter

of life and death, and our attachment system developed to treat such proximity as an

absolute necessity.

Imagine hearing news of a plane crash in the Atlantic on the evening your partner is

flying from New York to London. That sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach and the

accompanying hysteria you'd feel would be your attachment system at work. Your frantic

calls to the airport would be your protest behavior .

An extremely important aspect of evolution is heterogeneity. Humans are a very

heterogeneous species, varying greatly in appearance, attitudes, and behaviors. This

accounts to a great extent for our abundance and for our ability to fit into almost any

ecological niche on earth. If we were all identical, then any single environmental

challenge would have the potential to wipe us all out. Our variability improves the

chances that a segment of the population that is unique in some way might survive when

others wouldn't. Attachment style is no different from any other human characteristic.

Although we all have a basic need to form close bonds, the way we create them varies. In

a very dangerous environment, it would be less advantageous to invest time and energy in

just one person because he or she would not likely be around for too long; it would make

more sense to get less attached and move on (and hence, the avoidant attachment style).

Another option in a harsh environment is to act in the opposite manner and be intensely

persistent and hypervigilant about staying close to your attachment figure (hence, the

anxious attachment style). In a more peaceful setting, the intimate bonds formed by

investing greatly in a particular individual would yield greater benefits for both the

individual and his or her offspring (hence, the secure attachment style).

True, in modern society, we are not hunted by predators as our ancestors were, but in

evolutionary terms we're only a fraction of a second away from the old scheme of things.

Our emotional brain was handed down to us by Homo sapiens who lived in a completely

different era, and it is their lifestyle and the dangers they encountered that our emotions

were designed to address. Our feelings and behaviors in relationships today are not very

different from those of our early ancestors.

PROTEST BEHAVIOR IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Armed with our new insights about the implications of attachment styles in everyday life,

we started to perceive people's actions very differently. Behaviors that we used to

attribute to someone's personality traits, or that we had previously labeled as exaggerated, could now be understood with clarity and precision through the lens of

attachment. Our findings shed a new light on the difficulty Tamara experienced in letting

go of a boyfriend like Greg who made her miserable. It did not necessarily come from

weakness. It originated, instead, from a basic instinct to maintain contact with an

attachment figure at all costs and was amplified greatly by an anxious attachment style.

For Tamara, the need to remain with Greg was triggered by the very slightest feeling

of danger—danger that her lover was out of reach, unresponsive, or in trouble. Letting go

in these situations would be insane in evolutionary terms. Using protest behavior, such as

calling several times or trying to make him feel jealous, made perfect sense when seen in

this light.

What we really liked about attachment theory was that it was formulated on the basis

of the population at large. Unlike many other psychological frameworks that were created

based on couples who come to therapy, this one drew its lessons from everyone—those

who have happy relationships and those who don't, those who never get treatment and

those who actively seek it. It allowed us to learn not only what goes "wrong" in

relationships but also what goes "right," and it allowed us to find and highlight a whole

group of people who are barely mentioned in most relationship books. What's more, the

theory does not label behaviors as healthy or unhealthy. None of the attachment styles is

in itself seen as "pathological." On the contrary, romantic behaviors that had previously

been seen as odd or misguided now seemed understandable, predictable, even expected.

You stay with someone although he's not sure he loves you? Understandable. You say

you want to leave and a few minutes later change your mind and decide that you

desperately want to stay? Understandable too.

But are such behaviors effective or worthwhile? That's a different story. People with a

secure attachment style know how to communicate their own expectations and respond to

their partner's needs effectively *without* having to resort to protest behavior. For the rest

of us, understanding is only the beginning.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE—DEVELOPING SPECIFIC ATTACHMENT-BASED INTERVENTIONS

By understanding that people vary greatly in their need for intimacy and closeness, and

that these differences create clashes, adult attachment findings offered us a new way of

looking at romantic relationships. But while the research made it easy to *understand*

romantic liaisons better, how can we make a difference in them? The theory held the

promise of improving people's intimate bonds, but its translation from the laboratory to

an accessible guide—that people can apply to their own lives—didn't exist. Believing

that here lies a key to guiding people toward better relationships, we set out to learn as

much as we could about the three attachment styles and the ways they interacted in

everyday situations.

We started interviewing people from all walks of life. We interviewed colleagues and

patients, as well as laypeople of different backgrounds and ages. We wrote summaries of

the relationship histories and romantic experiences they shared with us. We conducted

observations of couples in action. We assessed their attachment styles by analyzing their

comments, attitudes, and behaviors and at times offered specific attachment-based

interventions. We developed a technique that allowed people to determine—in a

relatively short time—someone else's attachment style. We taught people how they could

use their attachment instincts rather than fight them, in order to not only evade unhappy

relationships but also uncover the hidden “pearls” worth cultivating—and it worked!

We discovered that unlike other relationship interventions that focus mostly either on

singles or on existing couples, adult attachment is an overarching theory of romantic

affiliation that allows for the development of useful applications for people in *all* stages

of their romantic life. There are specific applications for people who are dating, those in

early stages of relationships, and those who are in long-term ones, for people going

through a breakup or those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. The common thread

is that adult attachment can be put to powerful use in all of these situations and can help

guide people throughout their lives to better relationships.

1

There are two types of depression, exogenous and endogenous. Exogenous depression occurs in reaction to outside

events and is closely related to grieving. Endogenous depression is a result of improperly functioning biochemistry

and appears to be genetically linked with compulsive eating and/or alcohol and drug addiction. In fact, these may all

be different expressions of the same or similar biochemical disorders.

2

A note regarding *anything* listed on the web as a group for women or people who love too much: I cannot endorse

any group of which I have no personal knowledge, so *please* exercise discernment.



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