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Hooked on love

Addictive relationships actually have very little to do with love

If you've ever been in an addictive relationship, you'll identify with Eric's story. For three years, Eric lived with a practicing alcoholic. An alcoholic struggling with his own recovery.

Roger didn't drink every day. But when he did, he didn't stop until he ended up in a detox unit. And during these binges, he was at best incoherent or unconscious—at worst, abusive and suicidal.

Roger's unpredictable binges were taking a toll on Eric, both physically and emotionally. He found himself withdrawing from Roger, emotionally and sexually. And the more Eric withdrew, the more Roger turned to liquid fulfillment. The situation was clearly deteriorating, but Eric couldn't end it.

Eric said that he was "addicted to love." Some would say he was "co-dependent"—a word that's confusing at best.

The phrase "addicted to love" is a misnomer. When we look at addictive relationships, what we see isn't "love." What we see is addiction.

We don't see love in the sense of two partners, balanced in mutual caring for each other.

We don't see love in the sense of two people sharing openness and intimacy with each other.

What we usually see in addictive relationships is one person "taking care" of another, like a parent caring for a child. Caretakers—acting out their own dependency—"take care" of their addicted lovers in several ways. For instance, they protect their lovers from the consequences of their compulsive behavior. Or they refuse to create consequences of their own in response to the abuse they're getting; relationship addicts are "long-suffering" in the face of all kinds of abusive behavior.

Ironically, this "caretaking" enables the compulsive partners to continue in their compulsive behavior—while the caretakers continue in theirs.

To outsiders, caretakers often seem to be sacrificing their own interests while taking care of their addictive lovers. The outsider sees that the relationship is not just unfulfilling to the caretaker—it's literally destructive.

When we look superficially at these relationships, we may wonder how anyone could put up with so much pain and abuse! But the self-sacrifice of caretakers isn't what it seems. Relationship addiction has its payoffs:

- When we're in the "parent" role to someone in an addictive relationship, we can avoid facing our fear of intimacy. We're in the position of power, so we don't have to be vulnerable. We can avoid facing the deep and often unconscious

feelings of unworthiness that are always at the root of addictive "love."

Eric came to realize that he had always chosen troubled people as lovers because anyone who had their life together made him feel unworthy and inadequate. Eric's internalized shame molded his choice of partner.

- Certain unconscious needs are met in an addictive relationship. One involves the mechanism of "projection." By taking care of the lost child in our addicted lover, we're actually taking care of our own wounded and neglected child.

- Another involves the mechanism that psychologists call the "repetition compulsion." In therapy, Eric came to realize that his lover was much like his abusive, alcoholic mother. Unconsciously, Eric had "recreated" his mother in order to complete a childhood situation in which he had been neglected and rejected. By parenting his lover, Eric unconsciously worked to change the "bad" mother into a good mother who would love and accept him.

At bottom, it's these unconscious strategies that keep us locked into an addictive relationship. Since they are unconscious, we can't "figure out" why this person has such a magnetic power over us.

Only a deep process of emotional healing can bring the roots of attraction to the surface.

Healing our relationship addiction has two components.

- We need to bring to light the unconscious strategies behind our choice of partner. Once we can "see" what we've been doing, we can start to make conscious choices about who we're with, based on sound criteria and not just mysterious attraction.

- We must work with the underlying feelings of shame and inadequacy. This means healing the feelings of hurt and rage that we felt as neglected or abused children. (Abuse includes the shaming we experienced for being gay or lesbian in this culture.)

Once the unconscious strategies and the internalized shame are brought up to the light, the addictive relationship no longer has such a hold on us.

Eric found this to be true when in his recovery work he recovered his own wounded child-self, who was still alive, feeling all his old hurt and anger, deep in the core of Eric's unconscious.

Once his self-esteem was bolstered, Eric was no longer willing to submit to an abusive relationship. Having learned to nurture himself, he could paradoxically accept nurturing from someone else. He was no longer stuck with the job of parenting someone else—and getting no parenting for himself.

The author is a clinical psychologist with an office in Portland.

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