

Facing Love Addiction, Braving True Intimacy – Part III

What now?

The long-awaited “fix.” I wish it were that easy. But as you imagined, it is not. Like most worthwhile ventures, it takes work. And time. And work over time. While my recommendations are not comprehensive by any means, I hope they will highlight the importance and a direction in addressing head-on the love addiction pattern.

Before we begin resolution, I want to caution you that healing from love addiction is very similar to recovering from food addiction. Just as you can't not eat, similarly, you can't not relate. You can try. But anorexia is as addictive as over-eating and being a love avoidant is as addictive as love dependence. So, stopping is not recovery.

Choosing to not relate is not healing. Growing into a place of relating from a healthy place – that is what we are aiming for.

In sum, recovering from love addiction is about learning to accept and love yourself. For, it is from this place of internal groundedness that one then is capable of extension toward another for real intimacy.

The allegory of “The Wizard of Oz” comes to mind. Dorothy and her friends travel a long distance to meet the Great Oz. When they finally encounter the green magician, they bring to him their long trod fantasies that he will fix them. That he will magically grant their wishes. Much to their surprise, he is empty. A disappointment. A powerless human being. Then, while wallowing in their now despair, Glenda the Good Witch saves the day. She reveals to the cast of characters that exactly what they need, they have inside them. And they had it there all along.

Recovering from love addiction is a similar walk down the yellow-brick road. We keep looking outside ourselves to heal an internal wound. We keep hoping that someone will make it all better. That somebody will provide the permanent life raft that will give me security, value and worthiness. But learning to love ourselves from the inside out does not work that way. *We cannot heal the inside by filling it from the outside.* Rather, the recovery process is a journey back to Kansas, back to home in our own heart. We may meet a few odd ducks along the way. And may even find some high-styling sparkly red shoes, if we are lucky. But, the miles have to be trudged. There is no short-cut.

Let's get to the nuts and bolts, the how-to's of growth, healing and empowerment from love addiction. The overall plan is one used often in training athletes. We're gonna break you down in order to build you back up. But hold the faith. You will no doubt be a stronger you, a more solidified you, and certainly, a more relational you.

EDUCATE AND ASSESS

First, we must admit we have a problem and then get busy understanding it and where it came from. Stand back and observe your own behavior. Take an inventory of your addictive dysfunctional relationship patterns in both your current and past relationships. Look for themes in your choices and behaviors. How do these resonate with either what you observed as a child or the coping skills you had to learn in your family of

origin to survive? If you are currently in a committed relationship, unless you are being abused, don't make any decisions or demands until you have looked at yourself honestly through this new lens. If you are not in a current relationship, resolve to not engage in any potentially romantic interactions for a few months.

WITHDRAW

Just like any other addiction, withdrawal hurts. It can even be physically painful. Like a gaping hole in your heart. Like your insides are ravaged.

Go ahead and rid your life of anything or anyone that is toxic or not good for you. This may include bad habits, compulsive behaviors or one or more dysfunctional relationships. You don't have to do this all at once, but focus on one or two things or people at a time.

This cleansing process will probably feel gut-wrenching. You will likely feel lonely, sad and frustrated. You might even hit some despair and depression. Expect this and make a plan to cope, one that does not involve running back into someone's arms from the corner bar. Try to remember (or have someone remind you) that it will get better. You just have to stick with your intention even when you don't feel like it. Resist the urge to fill the void with the same ole, same ole. You are clearing the path for the greater good, the better you. Just keep going because you are now ready to feel.

GRIEVE

That's right. You heard me. Love addicts have a big hole in their hearts. And it needs our attention, not that of someone else right now. What is your story of abandonment? What are the roots of your not getting enough of what you needed as a small person? These wounds are present albeit buried and they lie at the core of your love addiction. The healing of your grief will occur most effectively in the presence of others. Maybe this is with a therapist, a trusted friend, a support group or a 12-Step meeting. Just pick a setting, open it up and let it fly. When doing so, bring lots of compassion and kindness toward yourself. We all have a story that makes sense. We coped the best way we knew how. Let it all go and embrace the you who survived and now wants to be made whole.

Such emotional work (and it is work!) will decrease your desperate hunger for instant attention from an outside source. You will no longer need emotional feeding right now as if clinging to a would-be crumb. Grieving moderates your emotional neediness and allows your expectations of others to be re-aligned as to what is realistic and what is not. In other words, grieving enables you to tolerate being alone. Folks can then love you without the pressure of trying to compensate for the original wound you endured and still carry around. You need to address your pain so that love is a gift rather than an emergency splint.

Additionally, in our recovery from love addiction, there is another loss to be reckoned with. We need to grieve life's limitations. Love addicts are addicts. They need a good high. But life is not about living high. It is about learning to accept and embrace the all in the everyday- the ups and the downs, the flowers and the dishes, the joy and the anger, the excitement and the boredom. Not one, but all. Life on life's terms.

Once we have started the necessary grief process, we can then begin construction.

BUILD YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO YOU

This is where we get to learn to live in and enjoy our longest, most certain relationship – the one we have with our self. Imagine dating yourself. What do you like to do? Where do you want to go? What stimuli do your senses respond to? What brings you joy? Comfort? Vitality? Ask yourself how life would be if you took responsibility for your own happiness, successes and failures and loved yourself the way you want to be loved.

It is time to get to know you. Think discovery. An adventure. An expedition. A life-long junior high dance where you are on both sides of the awkward gymnasium waiting to learn to dance with yourself. Here's a clue about how to do this – who were you when you were a kid? The unfiltered, pre-stamped version of adorable little you? How can the stories and passions of the younger you point to what is buried inside?

Building a relationship with yourself involves constructing good boundaries and establishing the constant of an enduring self-esteem. This warm and protected internal temperature can insulate you and allow you to endure the oft harsh nature that life and other people can offer. Boundaries and self-esteem also give you an internal GPS of good judgement as to what is right and healthy for you. You don't want to build this precious relationship with yourself and not arm it with the equipment necessary to take care you.

One last note to add here – one that will sound entirely contradictory and confusing – but here goes – we need other people, the right, healthy kind of people – to help us build this relationship to our self. They help us see things about ourselves we cannot see. They contradict age-old ideas about ourselves that are false. They love us up and build us up. They insulate and we internalize. We build and rebuild and hold and re-constitute.

CELEBRATE

You have done your work. Or at least enough of it to throw yourself a party. You are giving yourself the best gift of all – one of knowing and loving yourself. This brave act of accepting and loving yourself as you are will reap benefits for the rest of your life. Bravo. You are becoming your own best friend and now treating yourself with the same respect you would a good friend. Being alone no longer means you are worthless and undeserving of love. Once desperate and fearful, now centered and free. You have found your “enoughness” in yourself.

EASE BACK INTO RELATIONSHIP

You are now able to choose well and have the real, albeit imperfect, relationship you deserve. Desiring intimate connection is part of our human make-up but don't make it your highest priority or put your life on hold while waiting for “the one.” The more fully you live your life, the more attractive you will be to that right person when he or she comes along.

Meanwhile, always be true to you. Don't try to be someone other than who you really

are in an attempt to attract someone or make them stay with you. Chameleons are not capable of authentic intimacy. Never settle in trade for being alone. This move will only cause more pain down the road.

Do prepare for difficult times. You will be tempted by quick, empty fixes. They abound. But remind yourself of how far you have come and that you now have a toolbox full of self-soothing and loving means. Don't look to others to validate you – that now comes primarily from within. And the more you value yourself, the more others will respect you. When you start to feel alone or scared, find opportunities to surround yourself with others in a healthy environment. You are now being treated well by self and others. No exceptions.

STAY THE COURSE

Don't ever give up. Connection is our birth right. And true intimate connection originates from the inside out. You will slip. You will fall. But get up and begin again. This time with certainly, more doggedness and hopefully, more wisdom.

CONCLUSION

If you have read this series in its entirety, you might recall the scene by which we began. Terror on the dark seas. Alone and adrift. A horror film without Xanax. My fantasy at this point is that you are well on your way toward blowing up your own raft. The one I have outlined, the one you are building. The good news is that there is a raft for you. The bad news is that it is only big enough for one – no double seats on this ride. And the good news is you get to float by me and I get to float by you. Me in me, you in you, floating side by side as long as we choose to do so. Maybe just for today, maybe for many days to come. And that, my friends, is the essence of true intimacy. It is what life has to offer. And it is wonderfully enough.