Love Addiction Recovery Kit	
1. Understanding love addiction	*Pages 2 to 14*
2. Beginning to let go	*Withdrawal coping plan* *Detaching from obsessive thinking*
3. Exploring the past	*Unpacking the fantasy*
4. Preparing for the future	*Boundary plan*
5. Understanding healthy relationships	*Infatuation versus mature love*

This kit is for you if:

- You experience romantic attractions that cause you difficulty (e.g., attractions to unavailable people)

- You have difficulty sustaining long-term relationships after the initial attraction wears off

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Love Addiction Recovery Kit

If nothing saves us from death, as least love should save us from life
– Pablo Neruda

It all starts with a moment of connection. Their smile lingers for a second longer, and you feel that flutter inside. You look forward to seeing them, and wonder if they feel the same. Soon the empty spaces of your day are filled with thoughts of them. You become self-conscious in their presence, wanting to appear your best. The feelings of euphoria are a welcomed distraction from reality, making ordinary troubles trivial. And so begins romantic love.

Romantic love is a natural phenomenon that occurs across cultures and even in animals. Evolutionary psychologists[1] believe that romantic love is a motivational drive designed to secure a mate, procreate, and rear children as a team. The euphoria of romantic love typically lasts a few month months to two years, and usually fades into more of a contended companionship.

Can one be addicted to love? Researchers are discovering that the chemicals produced in romantic love are similar to amphetamines like cocaine. Researchers are finding that the same regions impacted by drug and alcohol use are also stimulated by behavioural addictions like sex and gambling.[2] With any rewarding experience, most people will find it pleasurable, and some will become addicted. At the outset, it is difficult to tell the difference between addictive and non-addictive love because similar neurochemical processes are involved.

I conceptualize the impacts of romantic love as a continuum. At one end is non-problematic infatuation, which describes the beginning phase of a romantic relationship. In the middle is problematic infatuation, which involves moderate negative impacts (e.g., an infatuation with a married

[1] Also see: Earp, Sandberg, & Savulescu (2012), Fisher et. al (2010)
[2] See Helen Fisher et al. (2016) for a summary of studies, Earp et al. (2017), as well as Mitchel et al. (2015)

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colleague which leads to difficulties concentrating). At the other end is destructive infatuation, which involves significant negative consequences (e.g., considering suicide or domestic violence. Think Fatal Attraction).

Continuum of romantic impacts:

Non-problematic	**Problematic**	**Destructive**
Infatuation	Obsession	Possession

Love addiction[3] *describes the experience of unhealthy attachment to a person or feeling of euphoria. While this attraction usually has a sexual component, love addiction is primarily about a desire for intense emotional connection. Love addiction is usually driven by an attempt to satisfy unmet emotional needs.*

Romantic love is defined as problematic when:

- The intrusive thoughts and behaviours have negative consequences
- Despite these negative impacts, it is difficult to disengage[4]

[3] I recognize that love addiction is not the most precise or scientific term to describe this issue. I chose to use love addiction over other terms because love addiction is simpler and more recognizable in the literature.

[4] This is similar to the definition for substance abuse given by the American Psychiatric Association

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Motivational Drives in Relationships

Helen Fisher[5] and colleagues have suggested that there are three drives involved in relationships:

1. Sex drive – The pursuit of sexual gratification. This drive can encompass sexual attraction to more than one person. Distortion of this drive can result in sexual addiction.
2. Courtship/attraction – Focused attention on a specific person with the intention of romantic and emotional connection. **Imbalances in this drive can lead to love addiction.**
3. Partner attachment – A long-term relationship with a partner. Difficulties with this drive can create attachment to abusive and unhealthy partners, or co-dependent dynamics (where one person overfunctions in the relationship).

These three systems are biologically distinct from one another, but all three can be encompassed in one person. These drives can also be split off and expressed toward different people. For example, you may feel sexually attracted to someone whom you don't like, or love a partner without sexual attraction. When any of these systems are out of balance, they can lead to difficulties in establishing healthy intimacy. Love addiction is understood as a naturally occurring attraction drive that has become out of balance and is causing negative impacts.

[5] See Appendix A for a more detailed description of these phases.

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Signs and Symptoms of Love Addiction[6]

- Attraction to unavailable, mysterious, or inappropriate people
- Intrusive preoccupation with a specific person or fantasy
- Increasing involvement with the person or fantasy in order to obtain the same level of euphoria
- Goals or life tasks are neglected as a result of the preoccupation
- Feelings of embarrassment and secrecy are experienced around the frequency, content, or intensity of the fantasies
- The fantasies usually involve a longing for reciprocation, but in reality reciprocation may not be desired (wanting and not wanting the prize[7])
- The person's emotional state is predicted by contact with the desired person (e.g., feeling happy if you see them, and irritable if you cannot)
- The desired person is idealized (e.g., ignoring, distorting, or minimizing negative features; believing they possess special power)
- Engagement in compulsive behaviours (e.g., sending messages, checking your devices for responses)
- Attempts are made to keep the euphoria alive (e.g., replaying fantasies or memories)
- Disengagement from contact with this person causes intense anxiety and sadness
- Relationships often are intense and develop quickly
- Decreased interest in your primary relationship, even if it is healthy
- Spending time engaging in romantic interests (e.g., watching movies, music)

[6] Based on questions from Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Love Addicts Anonymous, Mark Falango, and Charlotte Davis Kasl.
[7] From Is It Love or Addiction? By Brenda Shaeffer

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If you have selected 3 or more of these items, you may find this material helpful

Love Addiction Risk Factors

1. Attachment Injuries

We're *only as needy as our unmet needs* – John Bowlby

It is generally accepted that the nature of our early relationships influences our romantic relationships.[8] The countless interactions we have with caregivers form patterns that influence a child's level of comfort with closeness.[9] If caregivers were emotionally responsive to a child's needs, the child learns to trust others and welcome closeness. However, if caregivers were unavailable or abusive, the child adapts in ways that promote survival but can interfere with healthy intimacy in adulthood. For example, children of caregivers who were emotionally distant can become emotionally restricted and independent in order to survive their family environment.[10] Later in life, this person may find it difficult to be emotionally vulnerable their marriage. While these adaptations are helpful in childhood, they can create difficulties developing intimacy in adulthood.

There are many reasons why caregivers are unavailable. Some of these reasons include: working long hours, mental health issues, addictions, and spousal conflict. Harm can also occur when caregivers are emotionally depend on their children (known as enmeshment or covert incest). Abuse is categorized

[8] The field of attachment theory was originally pioneered by John Bowlby but has been built upon by many others, including Mary Ainsworth, and the concepts later applied to adult romantic attachment by Cindy Hazan, Philip Shaver, and Chris Fraley. For a recent article on the links between childhood and adult attachment, check out Wilhelm et al. (2016). Robert Karen's Becoming Attached is a good overview of attachment theory. Attachment theory is a vast subject that will not be covered in depth in this kit.
[9] Our attachment pattern also influences our risk for mental health concerns. See: An Adult Perspective on Attachment by Mikulincer and Shaver (2012)
[10] These kinds of dynamics can create an insecure attachment pattern called avoidant attachment

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as overt (physical, sexual, verbal), or covert (neglect, emotional enmeshment).[11] While most people recognize overt abuse as abusive, covert abuse can be just as impactful.

While most caregivers do not intend to harm their children, repeated episodes of abuse and neglect at a time of need can cause attachment injuries.[12] Attachment injuries can negatively shape a child's self-worth, because children commonly blame themselves for their parent's behaviour. For example, when a woman grows up with a distant father, she may believe that she is unimportant. As an adult, she may be attracted to men who are emotionally unavailable, further strengthening her belief about her worth.

When someone doesn't feel valued, romantic infatuation can be a welcomed refuge from the loneliness and pain. The cultural messages about love can also fuel unrealistic beliefs, like love will save us from pain. In my experience, love addiction often develops from a combination from a neglectful childhood combined with an attachment to romantic ideals.

2. Transference

The psychodynamic movement has popularized the notion that our adult relationships are symbolic representations of childhood dynamics. Therefore, when we experience an intense attraction to someone as an adult, it is likely that this person replicates a familiar dynamic from our past. When we relate to someone as though they were someone from our past, this is called transference.

As Alain de botton stated:

[11] For an in-depth explanation of family of origin dynamics, please see the work of Pia Mellody or John Bradshaw.

[12] Attachment injuries come from the work of Sue Johnson and colleagues related to couple therapy. Alan Robarge and others have adapted them to understand family of origin dynamics.

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We believe we are seeking happiness in love, but what we are really after is familiarity. We are looking to re-create, within our adult relationships, the very feelings we knew so well in childhood and which were rarely limited to just tenderness and care. The love most of us will have tasted early on came entwined with other, more destructive dynamics: feelings of wanting to help an adult who was out of control, of being deprived of a parent's warmth or scared of his or her anger, or of not feeling secure enough to communicate our trickier wishes.

With love addiction, unmet needs from childhood become sexualized, creating an intense experience. The connection felt in love addiction can be confusing because it feels like true love, instant intimacy, or like a spiritual experience. In reality, love addiction is the enactment of idealized love without risk. Although adult romantic relationships can be profoundly healing, unhealthy romantic infatuation keeps us stuck in a pattern of suffering that impedes growth.

3. Love Maps and Arousal Templates

In addition to the patterns formed by our caregivers, the accumulation of life experiences with family, friends, religion, media, and teachers form a blueprint for what we find sexually appealing later in life. For example, if our first romantic interest was a petite brunette woman with glasses, we may find ourselves particularly attracted to this look. Psychologist John Money called this sexual blueprint a Lovemap, and Patrick Carnes called this an arousal template. Arousal templates can become damaged or distorted when people are sexually abused or have viewed a lot of pornography.

When we experience something that is sexually arousing, it activates the centres of the brain associated with learning and reward. Our brain and body tend to encode any smells, sights or sounds that are a part of this pleasurable experience. Later on, we may experience euphoria when we encounter these reminders (called euphoric recall). That is part of why it makes it difficult to recover from love addiction, because the reminders can activate pleasurable thoughts (called triggers).

4. Culture of Romanticism

I am a child of Disney, so I learned that a wedding is a woman's finish line. I thought all I needed to do was cross that wedding-day finish line and I'd finally be whole and

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content. I could sit down, brush my long pretty hair, plan my outfit for the ball, and never feel lonely again. Happily every after. But I'm married now, and I'm still lonely – Glennon Doyle Melton, Love Warrior

It is disappointing when our romantic ideals don't match reality. While there is nothing inherently harmful about romantic stories, the myths they perpetuate can cause unrealistic expectations. In this next section, we're going to examine some of the common cultural stories that can distort mature love and fuel love addiction.

Myth 1: Soul Mates and The One

A man and a woman, both young and beautiful, are drawn together by a strong physical attraction that tells them they are meant to satisfy one's erotic and affectional needs. They are tossed about by the fury of passion and excitement and pain and fear, the two of them alone against the world and others who will intrude, forever and everlasting. Obsessed with one another to addiction, they are willing to risk all to retain the feeling of being in love. They are scornful of harsh realities – the two of them, in love with love.[13]

The concept of soul mates emerged with the romantic movement of 18th century Europe. Prior to this time, people married for practical reasons like survival. With the romantic movement came the idea that we one special person existed for us and we would be able to identify them through a special feeling.

The difficulty with basing relationships on infatuation is that these feelings often dissipate. If your relationship is founded on infatuation, you may question your commitment when your feelings change. There was even a disorder created to describe the constant doubt of one's romantic feelings! (Relationship Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.[14] Thanks, Romanticism!)

[13] From Sarah Cirese's book, Quest: A Search for Self. Also found in Dorothy Tennov's book Love and Limerence.
[14] This is why I like the work of Alain de botton and his videos on Why You'll Marry the Wrong Person, and How to Choose a Partner Wisely.

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Another harmful version is the myth of the effortless relationship. The reality is, conflict is a natural part of relationships, and not a sign you're with the wrong person. This is supported by the work of John Gottman, who found that 69% of the problems in relationships are perpetual (they never go away but over time they are managed). Dan Wile says that "when you marry a person, you marry a set of problems." How we manage these problems is important in our development personally and as a couple.

John Gottman and others take a more critical view of the soul mates, arguing that there are many people that we could end up with. The success of our relationship is less determined by our initial feelings than how we navigate challenges in relationships. This is not to suggest that all relationship problems should be endured at all costs. If your partner is abusive or is not seeking help for a significant issue, this may be a deal breaker.

Myth 2: Love Will Free Me From Loneliness

Remember the cheesy line from Jerry Maguire, "you complete me?" As much as we complain about love, most of us desire the romantic union will free of us from loneliness.

While a relationship can offer some solace from loneliness, there is a certain amount of loneliness that is natural in life. If you've had a history of abandonment or neglect, the desire to fill that void with romance may be stronger. As we become adults, we often have to find ways to nurture the aspects of ourselves that we did not receive as children. Instead of relying on others to fulfill us, David Richo has suggested that a romantic partner should never be expected to fulfill more than 25% of what you need. If we can accept that loneliness is a part of life, while working on self-care, this can create a healthy balance. Development of a spiritual practice can also be very helpful for feeling more connected. For some people that intense loneliness can be a symptom of depression that is treatable. Please see a health care provider if you are concerned you may struggle with depression.

Once we accept that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, we can live wonderfully side-by-side. As long as we succeed in

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loving the distance between one and another, each of us can see each other as whole against the sky – Rilke

Phases of Romantic Relationships[15]

Demanding that the high crest of any experience be permanent is living in a fairy tale – David Richo

Stage 1: Falling in Love (Infatuation or Limerence[16])

This phase involves the first phase of love or romantic attraction, when you feel obsessed with a person, have trouble sleeping, and feel on a high. People often experience physical symptoms, like butterflies in their stomach. As previously mentioned, our **body produces a cascade of neurotransmitters** like dopamine and amphetamines similar to cocaine in this stage. Romantic love typically lasts a few months to a few years, with individual variations. The purpose of this stage is to be able to select a mate hold their attention long enough in order to bond and procreate.

Stage 2: Reality, Conflict, and Trust Building

[15] This section is based on the work of John Gottman and David Richo, and Shirley Glass.
[16] This term has been coined by Dorothy Tennov in her book Love and Limerance, and later popularized by John Gottman.

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Like most things in life, what goes up must come down. After the initial attraction simmers, you begin to see this person's faults. This can lead to conflict and less agreeableness in the relationship. For example, when I first started dating my husband, I remember being much more open to things like camping (spoiler alert – I hate camping!). As our relationship grew, I felt freer to express my thoughts and feelings.

Another reason why infatuation dissipates is because we develop familiarity with our partner (called habituation). When we are repeatedly exposed to something to someone, our response typically dissipates over time. For example, when we first started dating our partner, the experience was novel and unpredictable, but now there is more familiarity. This is often why couples therapists like Esther Perel recommend engaging in novel experiences to keep the spark alive. While I think it's important to continue to create realistic expectations in a relationship, part of the journey may be tolerating the boredom that may come with the transition from infatuation to reality.

For a person with love addiction, they may end the relationship once they encounter problems or don't feel that spark anymore. They may also create intensity outside of the relationship by becoming infatuated with someone else, or turning to other addictions like pornography. In healthy relationships, couples understand that the initial phase will pass and are able to transition to a deeper friendship.

This stage is also an important for building trust. At the heart of a relationship, we need to know that the person we love will be there for us. John Gottman found that even in conflict, the underlying question was "will you be there for me?"

Stage 3: Commitment and Continued Growth

In this phase, couples develop their lives together while working on personal growth. John Gottman has found that healthy couples develop regular rituals and routines that create continued connection, support each other's dreams, and talk about their future. There is still conflict in this

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phase, but that the relationship feels generally secure. For people with love addiction, they may find themselves interested in other people in this stage, as they may become bored of the routine with the relationship. The focus in this stage is developing as a team, and focusing on what you can give the other person rather than what they are giving you.

Love Addiction Cycle[17]

1. Initial attraction. Something sparks a romantic attraction. This usually occurs through increased eye contact, communication, smiling, flirting, self-disclosure, or discussion of common interests.

2.Euphoric preoccupation. In this phase, you begin to think about this person more and it is enjoyable. The normal worries and concerns of life seem less important. The thought patterns tend to become habitual, and grow in frequency and intensity.

3. Intensification. Typically more contact with this person and greater risks are taken to interact. If reciprocation occurs, this often intensifies the attraction. One of the dynamics that heightens attraction is the uncertainty if the feelings will be reciprocated. Fear of rejection causes anxiety, but it also enhances desire. [18] Overall, the preoccupation with this person becomes more and more entrenched.

4. Reality intrusion. At this stage, the bubble starts to burst as reality becomes clearer. Maybe this person's flaws become more apparent, or it's clear that the relationship will not happen. The negative costs of this infatuation might also start to become apparent. This stage can also be painful if you find out that the

[17] Based on the work of Dorothy Tennov, Pia Mellody, Charlotte Kasl
[18] Doroty Tennov, p. 54

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feelings are not reciprocated. Overall, the longings and unmet needs projected onto this person become realized.

5. Despair and withdrawal. This phase usually involves a more painful experience. Maybe one person decides to end contact, or someone is rejected. This phase can feel like a sharp crash similar to a breakup. Cycling emotions of panic, depression, and irritability are common. There can be strong longings to recapture those old feelings, or seek reminders of that person. The person might experience doubt and uncertainty about their attractiveness, or feel embarrassed that they became so enamoured with someone.[19]

Common outcomes from this cycle:

1. **Repetition:** As one person pulls back from the relationship, the other draws closer, re-activating the cycle
2. **Ending:** One person decides to end the relationship and move on
3. **Substitution:** A substitute addiction or love interest begins

[19] Sometimes the person can start to carry on this same cycle within a relationship or dating situation. For more information on these cycles, view Pia Mellody's work on Love Addiction/Love Avoidance, and Sue Johnson's work on the pursuer/withdrawer cycles.

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1. Withdrawal Coping Plan

As difficult as this situation is, it is hard to let go of. After all, thinking about this person feels good! At this point you may have decided to disengage from this infatuation. However, this is where things often start to feel worse. As you begin to detach from this person, many experience a process similar to a breakup. Part of this is because your brain is withdrawing from the high levels of intensity. Another reason is because ending a relationship triggers a grief reaction that can feel like a death. It's natural to experience torturous rollercoaster of pleasure, pain, grief, anger, anxiety, and confusion.

As you begin to let the relationship go, it is natural to think about this person obsessively and want to reconnect with them. **This is a very uncomfortable time but this phase typically lasts 3 weeks to 3-4 months.**

Try to focus on:

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- Engaging in physical self-care (sleep, exercise, eating whole foods)
- Investing time in healthy outlets (journaling, talking to friends, meditation)
- Setting goals
- Understanding how this situation arose

Try to avoid:

- Seeking reminders or contact with the person. Seeking "hits" of euphoria tend to intensify the attraction and prolong the healing process (called intermittent reinforcement).
- Escaping through addictive processes (e.g., food, marijuana, shopping). Sometimes escaping into another addictive process can be a temporary refuge, but it often creates more problems than it solves.
- Shaming yourself. When you invest energy in berating yourself, this further entrenches your negative state.
- Seeking another romantic connection. It's natural to want to transfer that fantasy world onto another person, but you may just end up in a similar situation.

If you are considering ending your life or hurting someone else, please seek professional help immediately.

2. Detaching From Obsessive Thinking (RAIN)

Ghost of yesterday, stalking round my room, all night long you stay
- Billy Holiday, Ghost of Yesterday

You may not longer have contact with this person anymore, but how you get them out of your mind? You have probably thought of this person thousands of times, wiring them into your brain.

There is a famous principle in neuroscience that: "What fires together wires together." This is known as Hebb's law, and it means that what we continually focus our attention and energy on becomes a stronger pathway

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in our brain.[20] While we cannot control our thoughts, we can change our relationship to our inner experience. Mindfulness, being aware of our inner experience without judgment, can be a way to deal with in intrusive thoughts. By gently redirecting our attention back to the here and now, we can create new pathways. Instead of trying to block or remove your experience, mindfulness is about accepting your experience while taking some healthy distance from it. This takes continual practice, but over time it gets easier to do.

One of my favourite mindfulness exercises is called **RAIN**,[21] and it can help to shift the pattern of obsessive thinking:

R – Recognize when your thoughts start to get away on you. It's easy to get caught in fantasy and not even realize it. If the thoughts are triggered, intervening sooner prevents the addictive cascade. If we do not have great awareness of our thoughts, we may need to start with looking for other signs. One of my clients has learned that when she starts to spend too much time in fantasy she becomes irritable with her family. This is a sign for her that reality is becoming undesirable.

A – Accept and Allow your experience without judgment. This step might sound counterintuitive, because isn't the point to change obsessive thinking? However, if we accept where we are and allow our experience, this gives us more space to change.[22] If we are avoiding a thought, the brain starts to continually monitor our progress, which creates more reminders of what we're trying to avoid[23] (Just try not to think of white polar bears and you'll know what I mean!). Instead, it can be helpful to accept these thoughts as a common part of the human experience, and give them some

[20] For more information on helpful strategies for obsessive thinking, check out Jeffrey Schwartz's book You are Not Your Brain.
[21] The RAIN acronym is widely used in Buddhist psychology and is expanded upon by Tara Brach and Jack Kornfield.
[22] This is called the acceptance paradox.
[23] If you don't believe me, try not to think about white polar bears right now. I dare you!

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space in your mind to run their course. Eventually, the lack of resistance without indulgence will naturally allow the thoughts to move on.

I – Investigate your unmet needs. This is an important step because it can lead to deeper healing. When we are infatuated with someone, they often represent an unmet need inside of us that we are expecting another person to fill. So while genuine attraction exists, the intensity of that attraction is influenced by our unmet attachment needs from the past. Here are some questions for reflection:

- What am I hungry for that I did not receive as a child?[24]
- What is lacking in my life that needs to change?
- Where have I felt this before?
- What does the wounded part of myself need to hear?[25]
- Is what I'm wanting from this person realistic or appropriate?
- What feelings and I avoiding?[26]

N – Non-identification and nurturing. It can be helpful to ground ourselves in the awareness that all feelings and thoughts will eventually pass. Skillful healing is balancing between feeling our emotions and facing pain while taking care of ourselves. If we can meet our inner experience with friendly compassion, we the experience is much more tolerable.

Other strategies for obsessive thought patterns:

- Engaging in distraction, listening to music, or exercise
- Writing or journaling about your experience
- Taking deep breaths (exhaling what you need to let go of)
- Learning about love addiction
- Spending time nature (expands our perspective)
- Writing a goodbye letter to the person without sending it
- Visualizing your life without thinking of this person. How would you like to feel? What sorts of things would you like to think about?

[24] Question inspired by Veronica Kallos-Lilly
[25] This question came from Tara Brach's mindfulness podcasts.
[26] Question from Bruce Tift

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- Contaminating the fantasy (say to yourself, *my fantasy is… but the reality is…*)
- Accepting that attraction is a normal part of being human

- **Developing an affirmation or mantra:**

- *When I put someone on a pedestal and assign them supernatural powers, I abandon myself and diminish my own strength*
- *The reality of the moment is a superior refuge to the fiction in my head*[27]
- *This fantasy is really about an unmet need that no person can realistically fill*
- *This discomfort is an opportunity to engage with my own unresolved issues*
- *It's okay to have sexual thoughts and romantic feelings for others, but it's not helpful or productive to nurture these thoughts*

- **Say a prayer:**

- *Asking for help in overcoming the obsessive thinking*
- *Wishing the wounded part of yourself healing*
- *Wishing the other person to be well and at peace*

Ruminating thought patterns have a life of their own. Anything that shifts your state can help to disrupt this pattern. Music, exercise, or talking to someone tend to work well. Experiment with different techniques until you find a combination of strategies that works for you. Sometimes it may feel like nothing works.

[27] From Jeffrey Schwartz's book, *You Are Not Your Brain*

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Imagery Rehearsal Therapy for Dreams

Another common experience is to dream about the person you are trying to let go of. These dreams can be distressing and confusing, but they are a natural part of the healing process.

I have found Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) to be helpful in decreasing these kinds of dreams. IRT was originally developed for war veterans who were experiencing nightmares, and has led to moderate decreases in nightmares.

To try IRT:

- Write a story of the re-occurring dream but with a new positive ending
- Rehearse this new ending for 15 minutes before bed each night

Old dream script (example): John wants to get back together after I've married someone else, and I feel torn between him and my husband. I wake up feeling guilty and confused, because I love my husband and my life. I guess part of me still wonders if I would be strong enough to resist John's advances.

New dream script (example): Instead of feeling intense attraction when I see John, I greet him with a calm compassion. I thank him for what he has taught me, and say goodbye. It feels good because I am meeting him as an equal, and I don't feel powerless over his advances. When I am choose to not participate in the old dance, and I feel peaceful and proud.

3. Unpacking the Fantasy (Expressive Writing Exercise)

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After the initial withdrawal symptoms dissipate, you may have more energy to explore how this situation happened.

As we previously discussed, our romantic longings tend to be attempts to either gain what we were missing in childhood. In this way, the chemistry we feel reflects more of a familiarity from the past. Although it feels inherently good to feel attracted to someone, the intensity of the attraction may reflect unmet needs from childhood that we are seeking to fulfill. This next exercise is designed to help you understand the nature of your fantasies and unmet needs in three parts.

Part 1: Unpacking the Fantasy

Description of your fantasy [28]	**How does this fantasy relate to your past?**	**What are the unmet needs? (see list)**	**What is the most *realistic* outcome for this situation? (fantasy contamination)**	**Name some healthy ways to meet this need?**
1.				

[28] For a deeper exploration of the meaning of sexual fantasies, read Michael Bader's book Arousal. Patrick Carnes also describes how our fantasies often have meaning embedded in them (called an erotic moment).

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2.				
3.				
4. I engage in an emotional affair with the most attractive woman at work	As an teenager I had difficulties asking women out and felt rejected	To feel wanted, attractive, and powerful	We both are in relationships so this will likely to hurt everyone involved	To feel a sense of mastery and purpose in my life, apart from being desired

Examples of Deeper Needs

- Being seeing and heard
- Being wanted or desired
- Being fully accepted
- Merging emotionally and spiritually (positive mirroring)
- Feeling less alone
- Feeling powerful (attraction to power in others can be an attempt to compensate for our inadequacy)

Part 2: Summarize

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James Pennebaker found that writing about a stressful incident or situation for 15 minutes a day for four days can help to process unresolved issues. Summarize what you have learned about yourself in the previous chart into a paragraph or journal entry for the next four nights. Feel free to use a blank sheet or word document to write freely, and do not try to judge your writing.

Summary (example): I didn't realize how my fantasies were influenced by feeling invisible to the opposite sex in high school. In grades 10-12 I was overweight and didn't get much attention from girls. I ended up isolating and playing video games. As a young man I was scared to ask women out for fear of rejection, which just made my sense of inadequacy worse.

In my early 20s, I got into sports and lost a lot of weight. Suddenly women found me attractive, and I started to have a lot of sex. I still didn't know much about healthy relationships, but I enjoyed the casual sex. When I got into a long-term relationship with Jayne, part of me felt a loss of being wanted by other women.

My fantasies aren't just about having sex with attractive women. There is something intoxicating about the initial rush of getting to know someone for the first time. You feel that high of sharing everything about your life, and the anticipation of getting more and more intimate with someone. It's like a special secret that you both have together, that you both share a special connection. At this point, I would like to focus on letting go of my need to feel attractive and would like to be a better partner to Jayne.

Part 3: Supporting the Wounded Self

There is nothing inherently wrong about feeling wanted or attractive. However, if you struggle with love addiction, it may mean that certain parts of yourself need more support. This part is intended to help you connect with the vulnerable parts of yourself that need self-validation.

Questions for reflection:

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1. What would that wounded child need to hear from you?
2. What are some ways you can nurture yourself in healthy ways?

Example: I think I always wanted approval from my father. He worked out of town and was often very irritable at home. As a child, I would have liked to have heard that I was good enough just the way I was. I guess that I could try to offer that kind of support to myself now as an adult, but it will take some time. When I'm feeling triggered with fantasies, I could take this as a sign that I'm really needing something deeper, like to feel loved and supported. I could nurture myself by talking to a friend or Jayne.

4. Boundary Plan

As we move forward, it is helpful to develop boundaries in order to prevent future suffering. Boundaries are limits that help us to protect ourselves and others. By examining our past experiences, we can provide clues of what we can change for the future.

A trigger is a word used to describe anything that increases your chances engaging in an addictive behaviour. Triggers can be emotions, people, or situations. Looking back, you may have learned that disclosing personal

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information via text led to you developing romantic feelings for someone. In the future, you might want to have guidelines for yourself around communication in order to protect yourself and others. In general, it is best if we can avoid triggers as much as possible, because resisting urges depletes our willpower.

The late infidelity expert Shirley Glass stated that attraction is natural, but that the gradual loosening of boundaries can lead to affairs. If you repeatedly spend time alone confiding in someone, you increase your chances of being attracted to them (even if you are satisfied in your primary relationship). Glass recommends having consistent boundaries for potential romantic interests, like not discussing your intimate relationship with outside parties (called walls). With your intimate partner, you should work on having windows, meaning that you exchange your deepest thoughts and feelings freely. When people struggle with infidelity, it is usually because they have let their walls and windows become reversed.

The following handout is intended to help create a plan for establishing and maintaining boundaries:

Trigger	**Boundaries and Coping**
People o o o ○ Attractive women close to my age	o o o ○ Discuss my attraction with my therapist

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Places o o o ○ The gym	 o o o ○ Avoid staring at attractive people
Social Media and Communication o o o ○ Texting with coworkers after work hours about personal issues	 o o o ○ Only communicate around professional issues
Times and Dates o o o ○ Late at night before bed I will look at pictures of my ex	 o o o ○ Keep phone at the other end of room
Emotions o o o ○ Loneliness	 o o o ○ Plan regular time with: _____
Situations	

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o o ○ Driving or walking ○ Being alone with attractive people at work	o o o ○ Listen to music on walks
Accountability Supports (People who you can check-in with) o o o	
Notes o o o	

Healthy Relating

Romance blooms in wish; love in will – David Richo

Thankfully my ideas about romantic love have matured over time. I used to dream about meeting "the one" I was supposed to be with. Our eyes would meet, and I'd "just know" we were meant to be together. Unfortunately this notion led me to mistaking intensity for love.

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Now I believe relationships are like a garden. Instead of searching for a perfect soul mate, real love involves finding a person who approximates your preferences and growing a garden together. The real work of love starts after the chariot pulls away, and we begin the effort of building a life.

According to John Gottman and others, mature love is based on friendship and a commitment to work with someone through the ups and downs of life. According to this reality-based view of love:

- There are many people with whom you could be compatible
- The success of the relationship is based less on the initial feelings and more so on how you work to create intimacy
- Love is a choice to commit to overcoming conflicts and developing healthy intimacy on a daily basis
- Love is learning to accept others for who they are
- You and your partner have strengths and limitations
- Infatuation is a feeling that fades for most people and develops into companionship
- Mature adult love requires consistent effort and participation to be present

> *To accept reality as integrated, containing all opposites and reconciling them, is to be free of the shackles of fear and desire* – David Richo

5. Infatuation Versus Mature Love

Based on the comparison chart[29], reflect on the differences between infatuation and mature love, and write your experiences.

[29] Elements of this chart are adapted from David Richo's How to be an Adult in Relationships

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Characteristic	**Infatuation**	**Mature Love**
Definition	The state of being lost in desire or passion	A feeling of warm attachment and affection
Timeline of development	Immediate intensity, then dissipates quickly	Gradual growth
Contact level	Craves constant contact	Can tolerate and welcomes distance
Metaphors	Fireworks, the one, Cinderella	Warm flame, garden, layers of an onion
Experience	Urgency, intensity, sexual desire, irrational choices, euphoria	Faithfulness, loyalty, confidence, warmth, affection, security, confidence
Communication	Indirect, flirtatious, mysterious	Direct, respectful, open to negotiating
Outcome	Dependence, mood swings, confusion, loss of self	Personal development, growth, outward focus
Knowledge of other	Based on projection (what you want that person to be)	Is based in reality
Emotional Intensity	High to extreme (thrill) Adrenaline rush	Moderate levels of intensity with some low and high points
Power structure	Hierarchical, dominance-based, dependence	Equality, interdependence
Relationship descriptor	Hooked and attached	Bonded and connected
Intimacy dynamics	Seduce and withhold	Closeness leads to closeness

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Spirituality	Person becomes a higher power	Relationship strengthens spiritual focus
Giving	Based on what the other provides	Loving someone when they have nothing to provide
Fulfillment needs	Endless need for fulfillment	Needs are fulfilled with connection
Contact	Desperation for contact	Desire for contact
Security	Always in doubt	Secure connection
Boundaries	No boundaries	Flexible boundaries
Self-esteem	Decreases self-esteem	Increases self-esteem
Level of attachment	High – crucial for survival	Can let go of feelings of attachment naturally as they fade

In short, mature adult love is about finding someone good enough and making a great relationship through effort. This means having realistic and non-aspirational views of relationships. Part of this work is grieving ideals and fantasy to open up to the reality of the present. It also involves developing the skills to overcome life's challenges, including our own personal history.

Final Thoughts

Our wounds are often the openings into the best and most beautiful parts of us – David Richo

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Romantic love is a vast and complex topic with varied experiences. Although there are many universal aspects of romantic love, each relationship has its own mystery and complexity. Like most aspects of life, we are left to understand relationships on our own terms.

The concept of transference rests on the assumption that our past attachment dynamics greatly influence who are drawn to in adulthood. While I agree this idea, transference can minimize the significance of a real-time relationship. Human relationships are complicated, encompassing genuine moments of connection, and projection and fantasy. The belief that current relationships are only repeats of our past does not honour the moments of genuine connection shared between two people.

Romantic love is one of the life's greatest experiences. It serves an important purpose – to help us find a partner. If we have already found a partner, fostering romantic feelings for someone else is not useful. While we cannot control whom we are attracted to or the strength of our infatuation, we can influence how much energy we invest in it. Perhaps it is not that we desire others, but that there is an over attachment to this desire or fantasy. Maybe there is room for a wise relationship to attraction, where we can experience it and let it pass[30].

I also believe that no matter what you do, romantic love takes time to run its course. It can be helpful to accept the struggle and greet yourself with an attitude of compassion. It is natural to feel embarrassment for the intensity of our reactions, but most of us have been attracted to someone unavailable at some point.

Ultimately, the journey of healing from love addiction is a grieving process that involves an understanding that:

[30] This idea if influenced by Buddhist psychology.

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1. The relationship you desire will most likely never be completely realized

2. Even if the relationship came to fruition, the euphoria would eventually end

In the afterglow of romantic love, we return to the reality of life, which includes the mundane routines and personal problems. This is why healing from love addiction often involves a commitment to staying in reality and addressing the underlying issues that we may be avoiding. The development of a spiritual practice can be a powerful part of staying tethered to reality.

As disappointing as reality is, accepting it can lead to further growth and happiness. Just like when Dorothy learned that the Wizard was only a little man behind a curtain in the Wizard of Oz, perhaps growing into mature adult love is about coming of age. Maybe we can see the little man behind the curtain, accept him, and still venture down the yellow brick road anyway.

At the very least, please know that you are not alone.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer – Rainer Maria Rilke

Additional Resources

Books

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- *Is It Love or Addiction?* – Brenda Schaefer
- *Attached* – Amir Levine + Rachel Heller
- *Facing Love Addiction* – Pia Mellody
- *The Course of Love* – Alain de Botton
- *All or nothing marriage* – Eli Finkel
- *State of Affairs* – Esther Perel
- *How to be an Adult in Relationships* – David Richo
- *When the Past is Present* – David Richo
- *Love and Limerence* – Dorothy Tennov
- *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing* – Susan Anderson
- *Hold me Tight* – Sue Johnson
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* – John Gottman + Nan Silver
- *The Brain that Changes Itself* – Norman Doidge (Chapter 4)

Websites, Blogs, and Articles

- The lovely addict blog
- loveaddictionhelp.com
- Brenda Schaeffer
- Shena The Therapist – Love Junkie Podcast
- Real Love Recovery 101 – Lucy Aljana Bentley
- The Tyranny of Love by Helen Fisher
- Confessions of a seduction addict addict by Elizabeth Gilbert
- Addicted to love: What is Love Addiction and how should it be treated? by Earp et al. (2017) (search and download article)

Groups

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- Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous
- Women's sex and love addiction group through Sex and Relationship Healing

Videos

- Visit my website for a list of videos on love addiction
- Alan Robarge
- Tara Brach speaks on healing addiction

Appendix A: Mating System Chart

	1. Sex	2. Courtship/Attraction	3. Partner Attachment
Definition	Seeking sexual gratification from a range of partners	Focused attention on one person with the intention of emotionally connecting	Long-term love relationship with a partner
Synonyms	Lust	Infatuation, limerence, immature love, romance	Friendship, companionship, mature love,
Characteristics	Focused on a specific goal Drive expressed toward a range of individuals Temporary quelled when satisfied Can be felt toward people with no romantic intentions Decreases with age	Increased energy, focused attention, preoccupation	Contentment, mutual caretaking, maintenance of close proximity, separation anxiety,
Neurochemicals	Testosterone Androgens Oestrogens Dopamine Norepinephrine	Dopamine	Oxytocin Vasopressin
Active Brain Regions	Right subinsular region Left caudate and putamen	Ventral Tegmental Area Caudate Nucleus	Nucleus accumbens Ventral Pallidum Anterior Cinguate Gyrus Insular cortex Caudate Nucleus

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	Right middle occipital/middle temporal gyri Bilateral cingulate gyrus Right hypothalamus Limbic structures: right amygdala, right anterior temporal pole, anterior cingulate cortex, insula, orbitofrontal cortexes		
Timeline		12-18 months or longer	Can remain active throughout life

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