

# LOVE or addiction?



# Teen Sex and Romance

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## The Power of Young Love

Sex, love, and romance are delightful aspects of humanity and one of the new thrills of adolescence. At puberty we come out of the latent cocoon where sexual and romantic feelings lie dormant. Romantic infatuation increases, we feel new sensations and emotions, our body changes into something we have no control over, we experience heated crushes we often keep secret, and we hear stories of sexual exploration from peers.

Adolescent dating and romantic relationships can be a fun time where self-confidence is built up, communication is practiced, types of people are assessed for their appeal, impulse control is challenged, and relationship techniques are tested. That means learning how to enter a relationship, how to be in a relationship, and how to let go of a relationship.

A window of opportunity for love affairs is wide open during adolescence. This is both biological and psychological. By the end of adolescence the window closes and whatever was experienced is hard wired into the brain. Though intended to be an opportune time to prepare for healthy expressions of love, romance, and sexuality, what often occurs instead are warped images or beliefs and many trials and tests that result in sex, love, and romance being used like a drug and often in conjunction with other drugs.

## What is Love Addiction?

Love addiction is any unhealthy attachment to people, euphoria, romance or sex in an attempt to get needs met. Psychologically, love addiction is a reliance on someone external to the self *in an attempt* to heal past traumatic events, get unmet needs fulfilled, avoid fear or emotional pain, solve problems, fill our loneliness, and maintain balance. The paradox is that love addiction is an unconscious attempt to gain control of our lives, and in so doing, we gradually go out of control by giving personal power to someone outside ourselves. Addictive love is an attempt to satisfy our human hunger for security, sensation, power, identity, belonging, and meaning. Love addiction is very often associated with feelings of not having enough or not being enough.

Real love is not addiction nor is addiction love. However, because of the human condition, these two experiences seem to come together and result in the incredible pain and suffering adolescents witness or experience. There are many reasons why and here are some of them.

## Biology

Whether we admit to it or not, much of what is happening in adolescent love relationships can be explained in the language of biology. Ground breaking studies show that though 95 percent of the brain is developed by age five, the most important parts of the brain that lead to emotional and mental maturity go through a dramatic growth spurt between twelve and the early twenties. *The three most pronounced windows of opportunity wide open during adolescence are: impulse control, relationship development, and communication skills.*

How successful a person will be in adult relationships depends on the information, role models, and actions being wired into the brain during adolescence. This open window to the brain — ready to receive information that leads to healthy expressions of sex, love, romance, and self-esteem — allows everything in, both the good and the bad. Once the window closes to the task at hand, *the brain will never be as open again.* The definitions of love, power, and what it means to be a man or a woman become wired in the adolescent psyche and interpreted in adulthood as universal truths.

In addition, the differences between male and female brain and hormone development present challenges at a time when there is a window of opportunity for relationships. The three main growth hormones responsible for the sexual urges are testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone, which surge dramatically with the onset of puberty. At the end of puberty the young man has 1000 percent more testosterone than he had at the beginning and twenty times what girls have. Teen males experience five to seven testosterone surges per day.

Girls have hormonal spikes as well: progesterone and estrogen have an intimate relationship with neurotransmitters, or mood chemicals. Three of the main mood chemicals are: norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin. When mood chemicals are out of balance, the adolescent will experience anxiety and cravings. Low levels of serotonin cause a biological depression. Drugs, food, romance, sex, and dependent love are often used in an effort to compensate for any chemical deficiency.

The newness of falling in love is a neurological high. Sexual fantasies push out thoughts of more mundane and unrewarding tasks. If there has been an underlying depression, low esteem, or chaos at home, the adolescent may use sex and romantic fantasies to self medicate these ills. Sex can become a drug as powerful as cocaine. When we are in

love, dopamine and norepinephrine increase and produce momentary ecstasy and an adrenalin rush.

### **Psychological Development**

Just as we have *biological* development, we have *psychological* development that prepares us for adulthood. The psychological task of adolescence is called *Ego Identity or Autonomy*; moving from a dependent relationship with parents to one of independence in preparation for *Interdependence* or mature love. To move from dependency to autonomy, specific needs must be met at every stage of development. In the imperfect human condition, none of us get everything we need in just the way we need it. We unconsciously walk around with holes in our psyche and we look outside of our self to fill the unmet need. As we strive to fill these psychic holes with people, romance, or sex we create a *Love Addiction*.

In addition, the adolescents' true nature is often buried underneath learned bad habits, quirks, fears, old wounds, and negative beliefs such as "There is something wrong with me." Given that the adolescent brain is still being wired and the psyche is wide open, *they get to houseclean the ego in ways no other stage of development can*. Few have the permission or know how to do this. And even if we have permission, the pressure of peers and culture may discourage it. Most move into adulthood never having completed the job of adolescence and end up experiencing more addiction than love.

### **The Shadow Side of Technology — Internet**

Three out of four adolescents use the Internet to connect with friends, do research, and learn about the global village. For many, the Internet can too easily become an insane world that negatively impacts attitudes about sex, love, and romance. For the shy and depressed or just plain bored adolescent, cyber connections are easy to maintain or hide behind. The fantasy world substitutes for the real world. It is like being a three-to seven-year-old again. Make believe and magic and all of it at one's finger tips. Cyber love relationships become highly charged and addictive. Talking for hours on the Internet, quick involvement and abrupt endings, and the euphoria of romantic fantasy create a use and crash cycle that can be devastating and lead to depression and suicidal ideation. Cyber relationships carry as much emotional weight and pain as real ones, and their impact should never be underestimated. And then there is sex.

For some, the Internet has become a place where the gap between fantasy and reality becomes wider. The cyber world of sex can result in isolation, fantasy, objectifying people, and an invitation to use sex like a drug. For some adolescents it is sex talk with friends online that progressively escalates or it could be pornography. A study released by the US Justice Department discovered that one in four children online are exposed to unwanted sexual images. And for those who seek it, pornography is far easier to find than Napster or researching for a homework assignment. Take normal curiosity, an increase in hormones, the sheer amount of time young people spend on the Internet, throw in unsolicited instant messages with massive pop ups of seductive sexual images, add a dose of immature impulse control, low esteem, shyness, or anything else going on in the adolescent mind, and you have a recipe for compulsive use of sexual imagery.

Sexual images hit a part of the brain that can begin cravings for more and more arousal images and research is showing that a person can become addicted to pornography on the Internet in as short a period as six weeks, when used consistently. An adolescent does not have the brain or emotional development to limit sexually compulsive behaviors without support. If adult sex addicts rely on a strong support system to get through the pull of strong urges, certainly adolescents need the same or more support and guidance of wise mentors.

### **Chat Rooms and IMing**

Another deprave problem, experts say, are the chat rooms and instant messaging, known as "IMing," which allows sexual predators direct contact. Instant messaging is used like a phone line today. Though mostly innocent, a youth can spend hours chatting online with friends and even strangers who lurk in the dark and secret underworld that has appeal to those wanting to explore everything. It feels safe for adolescents sitting in their room and behind a closed door with friends or family in the other room, but it can lead to danger.

According to an MSNBC report "Streetwalkers in Cyberspace", dated February 4, 2004, a Los Angeles police detective passed as a thirteen-year-old girl in chat rooms to track down predators, and in less than five minutes the chat took a direct turn to having sex with the underage person. Young teens, especially those lonely and depressed, are vulnerable to finding someone who is special to them, and the chats get longer and more personal. Estimates are that a sexual predator solicits one out of five young people online. A *Dateline NBC* hidden camera investigation found men of all ages and backgrounds ready to have sex with an underage girl. Virtual crime and vice exist. If you are a troubled adolescent, male or female, becoming a streetwalker online is a sure way to make quick money. As one undercover decoy posing as a fifteen-year-old girl said, "I can count to ten, and by that time I'm being hit on.... You can almost have an auction."

#### *Emma's Story*

*Emma felt unpopular and unattractive. Deeply depressed, she turned to the use of the Internet and chat rooms to meet people. At first this was innocent. Emma felt a kinship with the people she was meeting online. As she continued to explore chat rooms, she came to sites where the vibe was more sexual in nature. She felt animated and began to frequent the sites that raised her excitement level. More and more time was spent in Emma's fantasy world of new friends behind closed doors.*

*Conversations in open chat rooms led to private online chats with guys she was drawn to. The chats became more intimate and sexual in content. She would chat late into the night and would neglect her schoolwork. In addition, she often felt exhausted in the mornings and would dose off in class. Emma's after-school job suffered as well. Emma was becoming addicted to the intense arousal and rich fantasy life she was having.*

*To increase chemically induced exhilaration, she set up online affairs with three men at the same time. She felt powerful having three guys in her life and keeping each a secret from the other. But the out-of-control behavior finally caught up with Emma. Her parents, suspicious because of her increased irritability and tiredness, poor grades, and loss of job, questioned her use of time and the Internet. She lied. However, the evidence was there, and her parents got her to therapy where she worked to stop the compulsive behavior. As important as changing her behavior was, the work she did on her depression and low self-esteem — the culprits that led her to the risky behavior — was of equal importance.*

### **Signs of Dependent Love**

When we become enmeshed with others — friends or romantic partners — we are experiencing unhealthy dependency. Here are some signs.

1. Jealousy and possessiveness
2. Over-adapt to what others want
3. Difficulty letting go
4. Fear of the unknown
5. Boundary problems
6. Give to get



7. Demand unconditional love
8. Attempt to change the other
9. Want, wish, wait
10. Stunt individual growth
11. Want and fear closeness
12. Need others to feel complete
13. Fear abandonment
14. Attempt to fix the feelings of other
15. Psychological games
16. Difficulty being emotionally intimate
17. Repetitive bad feelings
18. Projection and personalizing
19. Anti-dependent stance
20. Power plays

Dependent Love Addiction may or may not have a romantic or sexual component to it. When it does, the intensity of the relationship escalates.

### Signs of Romance Addiction

It is easy to become dependent on the euphoria of associated with new romance. When the chemicals begin to wane or the love object moves away, fear sets in and drama begins.

1. Obsession
2. Jealousy
3. Possessiveness
4. Dramatic mood swings or depression
5. Get high on intoxicating feelings
6. Anxiety when the love object is absent
7. Romanticizing interferes with life
8. Live on the edge of perfected love
9. Escape through fantasy life
10. Crave ecstasy feelings
11. Stalking the love object
12. Chasing the illusion
13. Lured by intermittent reinforcement
14. Withdrawal symptoms when the love object moves away
15. Use of fantasizing to reduce pain
16. Hanging onto the unavailable or abusive
17. Fantasy outcomes are disappointing
18. In love with being in love
19. Longing, craving, and expectations
20. High melodrama

### Signs of Sexual Addiction/Compulsivity

Learning the warning signs of what makes sex an addiction can be helpful as the young explore this newly discovered gift of sensual and sexual pleasure. *Sexuality is about biology, emotions, passionate living, and love.*

1. Use of sex and fantasy to escape or cope
2. Negative consequences due to sexual behavior
3. Mood changes around sexual activity
4. Inability to stop, even though there are negative consequences
5. Large amounts of time spent on planning sex, obtaining sex, recovering from sexual experiences
6. School, social, and recreational activities are reduced or affected
7. Guilt and shame around the behavior
8. Pursuit of high risk or self destructive behaviors
9. A pattern of out of control sexual behavior
10. Need for increasing amounts of sex to get the same high

11. Feeling at odds with family or spiritual values
12. Ongoing desire to stop or limit sexual behavior
13. Rationalizing sexual behavior
14. Frequenting pornographic Web sites or chat rooms
15. Sexualizing others
16. Hiding sexual behaviors
17. Attempts to heal past trauma
18. Degraded by sexual behavior
19. Sexual Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and abortion
20. Using people for sexual gratification

### Signs of a Healthy Relationship

True love's characteristics are the opposites of love, romance, and sex addiction. Some of them are listed below.

1. Creates a feeling of safety.
2. Shows balance and moderation.
3. Is both independent and interdependent.
4. Has healthy boundaries.
5. Brings out the best qualities in a partner.
6. Accepts endings.
7. Is open to change.
8. Invites growth in the other partner.
9. Encourages emotional intimacy.
10. Demonstrates emotional honesty.
11. Gives from the heart.
12. Accepts differences.
13. Experiences healthy sexuality.
14. Has a realistic view of romance.
15. Has a bottom line.
16. Encourages high self-esteem.
17. Trusts when one person is absent.
18. Cares without fixing.
19. Shares power.
20. Knows what love is.

The field of addictions has discovered that the neurochemistry of love cannot last forever. Chemical love is exhausting. If we try to hang onto the high or jump from one chemical high relationship to another, we will crash into illness or depression and try to pull ourselves up by using again. If an adolescent develops this pattern, she/he can develop a false dependency or addiction to a person, romance, or sex. Because adolescence is a dress rehearsal for future love relationships, an adolescent has the luxury of making a few mistakes. The important thing is to look for signs of love addiction and own the mistakes to prevent addiction as adults. ▼



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