



Understanding Self Destructive Relationships - Part 1 - Love Addiction

by Aubyn de Lisle MUKCP

Some of us find that we keep being attracted to those who are unavailable. This might be because the person we want lives abroad, or is married, or devoted to their career or an addiction and not their relationship with us. Even when we are aware of this repeating problem, we find we can't break out of the pattern. We certainly don't choose to break our hearts deliberately.

So what is it that attracts us about the unavailable partner? We choose relationships with unavailable people because this will enable us to live the relationship obsessively in in fantasy and play out the cycle of deprivation or doubt followed by euphoria of connection and validation on those occasions when it happens.

I nearly used the word 'object' instead of 'person' here, because whether the we know it or not the person chosen as a lover is serving a particular function for us by being unavailable. This is why this problem is linked with addiction, because the same cyclic dynamics are present.

Though we usually do not realise it, being involved with an unavailable person keeps us in the hopeful but unconscious position of trying to repair the root hurts of much earlier experience. The way we relate to others is learnt when we are children and subject to the emotional failings of our caregivers. We might have had a parent who was emotionally immature and self-involved, perhaps unable to tolerate the emotions of a child and responding to our needs inconsistently. The result was that we grew up with a confused sense of what comprises an intimate bond.

A fundamental aspect of this is that as very young children we do not blame our parents for their failings. We are programmed to depend upon them for our survival and hence, when things weren't 'right', we took the responsibility. We would assume that the problem was us and that if only we could get it right we would all be happy. We grew up hoping for validation and empathy, yet were frequently bitterly disappointed. Despite maturing as adults these underlying patterns and wounds remain. So being with an unavailable partner would be a dynamic familiar to us, and one which we might be compulsively drawn to try to repair. The same old belief is driving us: "If only I can get it right we will all be happy."

The simplicity of how this happens is stark: we repeat in adulthood whatever we did to get love as a child. Because he/she is totally dependent upon the caregiver from birth, the child learns to adapt or comply to get the parent's love. And if the parent is emotionally damaged themselves, unable to connect or to love in a healthy way, the child will try to adapt to emotional abandonment as the norm. This might mean the child being abused in some way to feel loved, or being compliant and suppressing their natural self in order to please.

Hence in this kind of adult relationship neither partner is present fully in reality. This kind of relationship might well be supported with email and internet contact, and texting. The end of the road is likely to happen if the two lovers actually spend real time together.

Abusive or warped relationships are often the tragic inheritance of adults who have had this kind of trauma in childhood. Although it is painful and difficult it is nevertheless familiar, and hence somehow safe because it is known territory. This kind of person will be irresistibly attracted to repeating dysfunctional relationships again and again. Of course they are seeking the one ideal person who will love them: perhaps a man or woman who is the perfect caregiver, or who is powerful or charismatic and who can provide validation and love. Sometimes the attraction is an attempt to repair what was wrong in their childhood, to prove the possibility of a different result. Yet again and again they will fail.

If someone has experienced painful abandonment or deprivation in very early relationships they may feel threatened by closeness. Their psyche will feel so afraid of experiencing that pain of abandonment again that they will avoid intimacy at any cost. This will play out in adulthood by the person choosing partners who will make intimacy impossible, who will reject or abandon them. Despite the pain of it, this kind of relationship nevertheless feels safe because it is familiar, and also evades the risks associated with real intimacy.

Tackling these problems is not easy, but change can happen. By exploring old fears and experiences of relationships with a counsellor or psychotherapist, it is possible to shift old patterns. The therapeutic relationship plays a vital role in this process, as the person opens themselves to exploring the pain and fears of their early life, and letting it go. Healthy relationship patterns, trust and a readiness for intimacy are just waiting for permission to emerge.