

Love, Drugs and Chemistry

by Olivia Ianculescu

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An unlikely choice of words, isn't it? What do they have to do with each other, you might ask. Well, I wouldn't have linked them either, before recently reading an article in a natural sciences Canadian print magazine. According to this, the chemical principle behind the feeling of love is comparable to that behind amphetamine addiction.

How is that possible? Let's have a closer look: The process of falling in love consists of two basic processes: the initial attraction and the ensuing emotional attachment. Norepinephrine, exuded by the brain's synapses, is responsible for triggering the feeling of love in the first place. Like drugs, it provokes euphoria, illusions of a "happy future" when we see the object of our attraction or when our cravings are satisfied, hyperactivity, decreased fatigue and appetite.

In the second phase, when our body gets used to the norepinephrine dose, we enjoy being close to our partner. This habituation feeling corresponds in an addict's case to high tolerance to drug. Separation from the loved one leads to unease and even angst. In addiction, we call these withdrawal symptoms and they can range from mild anxiety, insomnia, nausea or trembling to hallucinations, seizures or even heart failure.

When drug consumption is resumed, the body's reaction is similar to what lovers might feel when reuniting after a long absence. Furthermore, both love and chemical addiction create a physical need for certain emotional states – in the case of addiction it's the urge to re-experience the rush given by the first "high".

So falling in love and addiction seem pretty close if we look at both the physical and emotional reactions they induce. What is more, when brain scanned, madly in love people exhibited intense activity in the same brain region that becomes active when one feels the rush of cocaine.¹

Love addiction is one of the most overlooked types of addiction. It can spring from what appears to be the first stage of falling deeply in love with someone but leads to harmful obsession with the partner. Love addiction has hidden psychological causes that need to be addressed in therapy. Some of the most common ones are: protection from past disappointment with a close person, unrequited love, history of abandonment or lack of validation or love from parents, feelings of fear, anger and emotional emptiness.

"This affects their self-esteem dramatically in adult life. It results in a conscious fear of abandonment and an underlying subconscious fear of intimacy. To a love addict, intensity in a relationship is often mistaken for intimacy."²

Love addicts value the person they obsess about much more than themselves, which results in self-neglect and abandoning important aspects of their lives to care for and stay connected to the object of their affections.

Love addiction doesn't necessarily involve romantic or sexual relationships. It can involve a friend, child, sponsor, guru or religious figure, or even a celebrity, one has never met.

A love addict's main fantasy is the expectation that the object of his love is the solution to all his/her problems and will provide everlasting, unconditional support, and protect them from the wickedness of the surrounding world.

Ultimately, love addicts will be disappointed with the failure of their partner to meet these unrealistic expectations. They will need individual therapy as well as group therapy, such as S.L.A.A. (Sex & Love Addicts Anonymous). They must start the healing work of recovery by entering a grieving process, whose purpose will be to determine and address the underlying emotional causes that triggered the addiction.

This will involve taking some essential steps in gradual self-discovery: "breaking through denial and acknowledging the addiction; owning the harmful consequences of the addiction; and intervening to stop the addictive cycle from occurring."³

While I was researching this article, I stumbled upon a CBT-therapist's (CBT- cognitive behavioural therapy) answer to a patient seeking online help, who asked if there is any kind of intoxicating substance that has no negative side effects: "The short answer is <no>. The better answer is for those who desire an <altered state of consciousness>. Infatuation is an amazing high with no side effects. Love is even better but it's longer lasting and less potent. Creativity, art work, expression and collaboration all provide me with a natural high. Connection, intimacy, new friendships and rekindling old friendships – these are the highs I value most."⁴

Now an interesting point to discuss would be: Which is more harmful – chemical dependency or love? Some might say nothing is as painful as the intricacies of the human heart, while people coming off alcohol or drugs will certainly tell you that addiction is much more devastating.

What do you think? We'd love to hear more points of view. Drop us a line in the comment section below.

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Sources:

¹<http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blogland/2007/aug/28/this-is-your-brain-on-love/>

^{2,3}<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/05/26/what-is-love-addiction/>

⁴<http://www.choosehelp.com/experts/addictions/addictions-jim-lapierre/natural-highs>

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