

Love, Lust & Other Stuff



“I went straight to his apartment, *knocking* and *sobbing* until his brother opened the door.”

When *love* turns obsessive

WHAT DRIVES A WOMAN TO GO THROUGH A GUY'S E-MAIL, LINGER OUTSIDE HIS HOUSE IN THE POURING RAIN, OR DITCH HER BEST FRIENDS FOR THE CHANCE TO POSSIBLY RUN INTO HER CRUSH DU JOUR? THE ANSWER MAY LIE WITHIN THE SAME TINY AREA OF THE BRAIN THAT FUELS OUR MOST DESTRUCTIVE ADDICTIONS. BY PAULADERROW

When Kim Berlin fell in love for the first time, she fell hard. “He was the first person I’d been with sexually,” says Berlin, who was a college freshman at the time.

Maybe it was because she was new to dating, but she admits, “I was crazy, crazy obsessive.” For one thing, she had a hard time accepting that her new guy had ever been with anyone else. “I was consumed with his high school girlfriend—a redhead,” Berlin recalls. “I literally started following redheads down the street to see what they had that I didn’t.” It didn’t help that her guy seemed to get off on making her jealous. “Once, he casually mentioned that he was ‘haunted’ by his ex,” a remark that left Berlin constantly worried that she would lose him. For a while, he even kept the redhead’s photo on his desk. When it disappeared, instead of feeling relieved, Berlin waited until he was out of town, then tore through piles of his boxes until she unearthed the hated image, just so she could stare at it. “The only time I felt at peace was when he was napping next to me in bed,” she says.

Ah, obsessive love. Lena Dunham’s Hannah felt it for the elusive Adam during the first season of *Girls*. Anastasia felt it for *Fifty Shades*’ tortured-but-hot Grey. And if you’ve ever truly been head over heels, you’ve felt it too: the butterflies before you see your crush, the wrenching anxiety as you wait for his text, the over-the-top elation when you get it, the two hours spent analyzing

his message (“What does he *mean* by ‘BRB’?”), the inability to think about anything else....

While it sounds kind of crazy (and indeed, we wouldn’t recommend following strangers down the street if you don’t want to get arrested), in some ways this kind of behavior is totally normal. “I would say that if you don’t experience some degree of obsessive thinking as a relationship takes hold, you’re not truly in love,” says Helen Fisher, PhD, a biological anthropologist at Rutgers University, in New Jersey. Blame it on evolution: Once we find someone we believe is right for us, we’re literally driven to pursue that person. That’s the way the brain is built.

Wired to Obsess

“In the early stages of love, you’re pretty much drunk on dopamine—the brain chemical linked with feelings of ecstasy, cravings, even addiction,” says Pepper Schwartz, PhD, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington at Seattle and coauthor of *The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples*. Brain-imaging studies by Fisher and her research team found that when smitten people look at a photo of their beloved, activity sparks up in a tiny area of the midbrain known as the ventral tegmental area, bathing your synapses with druglike waves of feel-good dopamine. “It’s the brain’s reward system—the purpose is to create wanting, craving, and focused energy,” Fisher explains. Scarily, it’s the exact same circuit that gets triggered in cocaine addicts. “Once it’s acti-

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He was all I wanted.”

vated, it leaves you highly motivated to get what you’re after, whether it’s drugs or a person,” says Fisher. “We’ve proven that romantic love can be just as powerful as an addiction. I know someone who, after her boyfriend dumped her, took 10 years to get over it. Once we get it into our head that someone would be a good life partner, the brain is very well built to turn a person into a doormat.”

Fisher’s MRI studies also suggest that when someone is crazy in love, the insular cortex, a brain region associated with anxiety, lights up like a Christmas tree. Which is why, when your crush’s texts stop coming (“He said he would BRB!”), you immediately worry that someone has broken into his place and killed him. Or that he’s with another girl. Because what else could it be?

Then there’s the roiling mix of hormones that make you sexually hungry for the object of your obsession. For Jordan Katz, 25, the chemistry was instantaneous when she met an older media magnate in an L.A. club. His age (35) and success were a potent combination, and she was instantly attracted. “That night, he took me to his place, and I basically stayed there for a week, just the two of us. My friends were freaking out,” Katz recalls. That set the tone for their relationship. “He’d pick me up, and we’d go back to his place and have sex,” Katz says. “Then he’d leave me in the apartment and go out—he said I looked too young for him to take out in public—and I’d happily cook him dinner. It didn’t matter how he treated me. He was all I wanted.”

“When you start to feel a little bit in love, your testosterone activity increases and everything about the person becomes sexually attractive,” explains Fisher. It also works the other way around: If you fall into bed with a stranger, “hormones are released—oxytocin and vasopressin—that can boost your feelings of attach-

ment,” she says. Contrary to urban legend, what matters most in terms of initial sexual attraction isn’t the chemicals known as pheromones (in other animals, pheromones are detected by a heightened sense of smell and tend to drive mating behavior). In humans, sexual desire is driven by something Fisher calls the brain’s love map: that list of things you subconsciously look for in a mate, whether it’s success, accent, body type, or whatever gets you going. Although studies suggest hormones play a role in why we’re drawn to certain people (for instance, some research suggests women feel hornier—and are more alluring to men—during ovulation), “desire has more to do with what we’re looking for and how that person responds to us than it does any mix of odors or hormones,” Schwartz says.

Chemistry aside, this can’t-eat-or-sleep phase of love eventually shifts into the I-can-see-his-faults phase. “We still find dopamine-related craving activity in the brains of newlyweds who’ve been together for several years,” says Fisher. “But typically, the hysterical obsession dissipates after a year or so.” If it didn’t, no one would get anything done. Or we’d all end up dead, like Romeo and Juliet.

Not good for the survival of the species.

“LOVE CAN BE JUST AS POWERFUL AS AN ADDICTION.”

When Normal Love Turns Crazy

For some people, though, this crazy-making love *doesn't* dissipate. Instead, it persists even when a guy breaks his promises...or rarely drops by...or accidentally texts a photo of another woman’s boobs. What’s crazier is that on-again, off-again attention can actually *fuel* obsessive love, even in an otherwise levelheaded woman.

That’s what happened when Steph, 26, met a guy named Jason* right before she was about to move to Spain for a long-awaited chance to teach English there. “I fell in love with him instantly. We were inseparable, and we talked about moving in together when I got

back,” she recalls. Steph even proposed calling off her dream trip. “He was very against that,” Steph says, “under the guise of being supportive.”

So off she went. “I wrote him love e-mails every day, sent him videos of my life there. No reply.” (Or, as they say in Spain, nada.) Yet she didn’t doubt his love for a second, not when he started sounding “distant and weird” on the phone...or when he failed to pick up at all. Then during an infrequent call, he dumped her with no explanation. Instead of writing him off as a jerk, Steph got on the next plane home, sobbing through the entire intercontinental flight. “I went straight to his apartment, knocking and sobbing until his brother opened the door. He told me Jason hadn’t been into our relationship for a while. That should have been clear to me by then.”

This dogged determination is a common result when one partner plays hard to get. “The biggest reason a healthy, normal infatuation fails to mature and instead shifts into an unhealthy obsession is when someone gives you just enough attention and encouragement to fuel your feelings but not enough for you to feel sure of him,” says Schwartz. “It’s the ‘yes, I will; no, I won’t’ pattern that makes sane people go totally nuts.” In other words, when you get only occasional little hits of that love drug, the cravings just get stronger.

Are You the Obsessive Type?

Sometimes, though, a bad case of obsessive love can take hold with virtually no encouragement. “Often, people get ‘hooked on the look’—they’re attracted to someone because he’s hot or a bad boy, and they ignore warning signs that the person might not be right for them...or even interested in them,” says psychotherapist John D. Moore, PhD, author of *Confusing Love With Obsession*. “I met this guy at a college party and slept with him that night,” says Ann, a communications strategist in Atlanta. “I refused to be a one-night stand, so I did everything in my power to make it happen again.” She got a copy of his class schedule from a friend who worked in the registrar’s office, and “I planted my ass in his path for months,” she says. “I hung around the language lab even though I didn’t take a language class. I cased the bar where he played darts. I walked past his home at least three times a day, a home that was located at the top of a steep hill—in rain, snow, it didn’t matter—just to get a glimpse of the guy.” Perhaps not surprisingly, her efforts didn’t amount to much: “He turned into a one-year stand—the guy I *sometimes* had sex with.”

Most of us have been guilty of committing at least one or two drive-bys or walk-bys, as Moore calls them, not to mention stalking the object of our obsession on Facebook and Instagram. But psychologists believe certain personality types are particularly vulnerable to falling into these all-consuming patterns. People who grew up in homes with alcoholism or who don’t have nurturing parents may be prone to forming what experts call anxious or avoidant attachment styles—becoming clingy or pursuing guys who are never quite available. “With an anxious attacher, if a guy doesn’t call, she’ll assume it’s her fault. She doesn’t

*Men’s names have been changed.

OBSESSION CONFESSIONS

THE CRAZY STUFF READERS DID FOR LOVE

“I created a fake Facebook account with a generic name and friended the new girlfriend of an ex I was obsessed with so I could stalk her Wall and pictures and see what they were up to together. I kept the account until they broke up...eight months later.”

—Mary G.*, 24

“When I found out my high school boyfriend was cheating on me, I went to his school, pretended to be a nurse who needed to get him his medicine, walked to his classroom, then drove a knife into his desk and said, ‘This is what you’ve done to my heart.’”

—Judy C., 25

“When I was 22, my boyfriend, a doctor, dumped me. I was heartbroken, and although I knew he was seeing someone else, I’d call him up and we’d meet and have sex—in his office, on exam tables. Then one time, we were in the ‘on call’ room, and he left for a patient check. I don’t know what possessed me, but I started searching his jacket pockets. Right there with my sorry, pathetic hands, I found the engagement ring he’d gotten for his soon-to-be fiancée!”

—Cara D., 30

“I was leaving for Europe for a few months, and to make sure he didn’t forget me, I hid 370 sticky notes—one for every day we’d been together—all around his house to remind him of the little things I loved about him. It sounds sweet, but months after we broke up, he and his new live-in girlfriend were still discovering my Post Its—in his suit pockets, the freezer, in medicine bottles. What can I say? I’m really good at surprises.”

—Jess C., 28

“In college, I had a thing with a guy who pretty much had a thing with everyone, but I was sure our thing was love... maybe because it was the best sex I’d had up until that point. Eventually, he got a real girlfriend, but I was still so obsessed, I purposely stayed on campus over break (because they were there), loitering near their house for hours over the course of three days, wearing a short skirt that was so inappropriate for the freezing cold.”

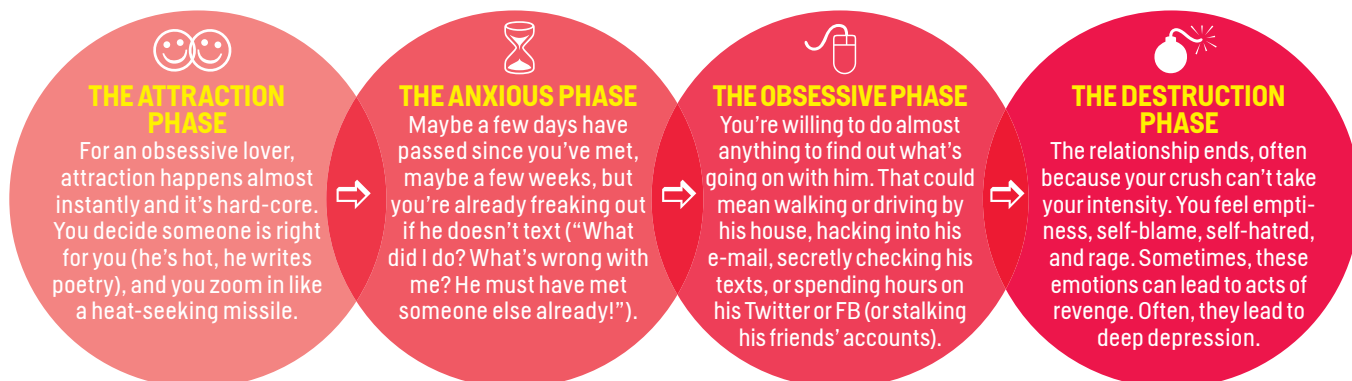
—Sadie M., 29

“I went crazy Facebook-stalking this married guy at work who was flirting with me. I spent a year going online for at least an hour a night, typing his friends’ names into search engines and trying to piece together the puzzle of his life. After a while, I’d spend as much time doing this on his friends’ and families’ pages as I did on his—I couldn’t stop. I eventually had to leave the job to break the cycle.”

—Jade S., 31

*Some names have been changed to protect the obsessed.

THE STAGES OF OBSESSIVE LOVE



SOURCE: JOHN D. MOORE, PHD, AUTHOR OF *CONFUSING LOVE WITH OBSESSION: WHEN BEING IN LOVE MEANS BEING IN CONTROL*

“I walked past his home at least

three times a day.”

is it *love* or obsession?

If you've ever had an *insane crush*, you've probably done (or felt) at least a few of the things on this list. But according to psychotherapist John D. Moore, if these emotions or behaviors kick in at hello (or soon after), last well past the initial head-over-heels phase, or happen time and time again despite a crush's lack of interest or unreliability, that's a sign your love may be unhealthy.



You're not one to go slowly when it comes to love. **Once you fall, you fall hard.** *yes* *no*

Instead of being yourself around your crush, you walk on **EGGSHELLS, CONSTANTLY CENSORING** yourself so he **continues to like you.** *yes* *no* *maybe*

You're not comfortable unless you know **how he spends every minute**—and you'll question him (not to mention **SCROLL THROUGH HIS TEXTS** or e-mail) until you find out. *yes* *no*

You've always been close to your family and girlfriends. **Except when you meet someone.** Then you drop everyone like a **HOT POTATO.** *yes* *no*

You **CAN'T** focus on work—or anything else—because you're **constantly thinking** about **when** you'll see him next, **what** he's doing now, and **why** he isn't texting you this **VERY MINUTE.**

never! *I guess...* *definitely*

You **IGNORE WARNING SIGNS** that your crush may not be good for you, because **you're so totally sure your heart is never wrong.** *yes* *no*

feel whole when she's not with him," explains Arthur Aron, a social psychologist at Stony Brook University, in New York. "Avoidant attachers tend to be happy even when their feelings aren't fully requited, because they get the excitement of the back-and-forth without actual commitment."

Kim Berlin stuck things out with her college beau for four years, partly because of the drama. "We had a very heated sexual relationship, as well as giant screaming fights on the street. We'd break up and get back together. One time, I jumped out of a moving car because I was so pissed at him."

If all this doesn't sound like a very good relationship foundation (never mind life-threatening), it isn't. "When you get overly intense too fast, it's inevitable that what you fear most will happen—the person you love will be scared away," warns Schwartz.

How to Break the Cycle

Not coincidentally, the cure for obsessive love is the same one recommended to any other addict: Gather your support network around you, and drop the obsession cold turkey.

First, though, you have to recognize your own behavior: Do you go from 0 to 60 really quickly? Does a crush become your whole world almost immediately, despite warning signs that he may not be good for you? (If you're not sure, take a look at the checklist at left.) "Once you see your patterns," says Moore, "you have an opportunity to create positive change."

The next step: Quit the object of your obsession—no easing out, no residual sleepovers. An all-or-nothing approach is crucial to breaking the addiction. "Every time you Google him, you're getting a little hit of dopamine, and your cravings only get stronger," says Fisher. De-Friend him, unfollow him, block him, delete his texts from your phone—the whole deal. Then vow not to contact him and that you won't respond if he contacts you.

"It helps to have friends hold you accountable," says Schwartz. "Tell them that you're not allowed to mention his name in their presence, and make them hold you to it." If you can't sleep or get work done or you're miserable for weeks on end, Moore recommends seeing a therapist who specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy. "The goal with CBT is to replace irrational thoughts—that you must be with someone to feel complete—with a healthier view of love," he explains.

For Berlin, her tumultuous relationship ended when she discovered her boyfriend had done the thing she feared most: slept with his redheaded ex. Disgusted, Berlin started hanging out with nicer guys, including a work buddy who was the opposite of the cheater. "Ethan wasn't on my romantic radar at all," she admits. "But I was very much myself with him, and our friendship caught fire." It wasn't dramatic. There were no screaming fights or leaps from moving vehicles. "I wasn't afraid of losing him—and I fell for that sense of comfort and intimacy," Berlin says. So much so, that after dating for a year and a half, the two got married. "In every other relationship, I never fully felt that I had the person," she says. "But with Ethan, things felt solid, stable, and true. I never recognized that as love before, but now I know it's the real deal."

"I jumped out of a *moving car* because I was so pissed at him."

I WAS Obsessed WITH MY teacher

WHAT STARTED AS A TEENAGE DREAM BECAME AN ADULT OBSESSION FOR JAMIE*, NOW 30, WHO WAS SO HOT FOR HER HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, SHE STOPPED AT NOTHING TO SEDUCE HIM.

ASTOLD TO MICHELLE RUIZ

Neil* was one of the biggest jocks at my high school—super fit and full of swagger. Except he was my 47-year-old varsity coach, and I was a 17-year-old virgin obsessed with getting him in bed.

Neil looked just like Richard Gere...and was kind of a dick. He was a computer-science teacher and a very tough coach. I threw discus, but I was no junior Olympian so he really didn't give me the time of day. I was so jealous of the girls who got to go to state championships and stay at hotels with him. Although Neil had a wife, I knew his marriage was rocky and his wife was 17 years his junior—it fueled my fire to know that he liked younger women. I've always been attracted to older men. I like the challenge. I kissed his ass at practice, showing up early, lingering late. I knew he wasn't impressed with me in track, so I guess I was trying to win...him.

I started by taking all of Neil's classes—even though I had no interest in that shit. I took certain routes through the hallways, showing up wherever he'd be. I gave Neil a CD filled with make-out music (lots of Dave Matthews). But he never gave in. He actually approached a young, female teacher and asked her to tell me to back off. I bawled out of humiliation and didn't go back to practice for a couple of days. Even after graduation, I had Neil's number from the team phone list, and I'd call and say, "Hi, do you need help with the Special Olympics?" He was still a little standoffish, but all I could do was go after what I wanted.

I went off to college, hooked up, and lost my virginity, but I still thought about Neil nonstop. I called him every few weeks, and the more we talked, the more I felt him starting to treat me like an adult. When I came home from college that Christmas, Neil invited me to watch a hockey game. By then I was 19, and he was separated. I shaved my bikini line and drove over to his house, shaking with excitement. He had me park at a bank down the road from his house because he was still legally married, but I didn't even care that I was being hidden. My heart was pounding, but I wasn't nervous. He made the first move, and we

started making out. There was no BJ. He didn't go down on me. We just got right to it: It was all about a man, his dick, this young chick, and sex. Was he good in bed? Now

that I'm older, I can honestly say *no*. But at the time, I'd had sex only once before, so it wasn't disappointing to me at all. Afterward, almost immediately, he said, "Are you ready to go?" I felt crushed. I just wanted to stay there and talk to him.

I transferred to a college in our hometown to be closer to Neil. I'd drive down to the bank, he'd pick me up, we'd fuck, and I would leave right after. I was just happy to be sleeping with him. The assistant track-coach position opened at our old high school, and Neil surprised me and said, "Come on board." He was divorced now, lonely, and liked my company. We went to states together, just like I'd dreamed about. He'd sneak into my room for sex. People were talking, but I didn't care. I was doing exactly what I wanted to do.

I convinced Neil to let me crash in the extension on his house. I confided in the same young teacher who Neil had asked to talk to me about the CD. She said, "You're beautiful, you're young, and there's no future there." I wanted to get married and have babies eventually, and Neil wouldn't even kiss me in public. We started to fight a lot. I felt like all he was really giving me was sex. I'd say, "I love you, Neil," but he wouldn't say it back. He was 51; he knew what real love was. I had yet to learn.

After two years living with Neil, my obsession started melting away. I'd fought so hard to get what I wanted, and now I had it. I'd basically won. Right before I moved out, I got a call that Neil had suffered a stroke, and he'd put me down as executor in his will. I was the closest person to him, and it freaked me out. I loved him, but I wasn't in love with him anymore. After the stroke, Neil couldn't speak or write. Out of loyalty, I helped him with his speech therapy. He cried a lot and told me he missed me. I felt guilty, but I wanted a different future. Even after Neil, I was still turned on by the challenge of an older guy. My next boyfriend was 17 years older. Neil and I are still friends, and I don't regret going after him. I was just chasing what I wanted. I say follow your heart—but know the difference between love and obsession. You might pour years of your life into someone, only to realize that it was all just an infatuation. ■

*Names have been changed.