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Addicted to love?

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BENGALURU: "I began to shake. My chest hurt. I had to breathe deep. I was scared I would die of my feelings". This was a person's response to his/her ex-lover's photograph, in a 2010 study lead by researchers at Rutgers University. They were studying various aspects of love, including its addictive properties. They found that the lover's image stimulated the same parts of a subject's brain associated with cocaine cravings. The subject wanted his or her ex, like an addict wants the next hit.

Love can be addictive but can there be addicts? Kala Subramanian, a counselling psychologist, has certainly seen a few and adds that "unhealthy attachments" are not restricted to romantic love. "The same thing can happen between friends, teacher and student or patient and therapist." Show Me the Love Kala says that the addict generally is looking for acceptance. "They crave validation all the time," she says. While normal relationships have their highs and lows, bouquets and arguments, the addict needs constant and unconditional acceptance. "Their relationship may not stand under the strain of such unreasonable expectations," she says.



"When a patient gets positive reinforcement from a therapist constantly, sometimes they grow addicted to that and don't end the therapy," she says, to cite an example. It calls to mind Alia Bhatt in Dear Zindagi. "But a therapist is trained and will know how to terminate this situation without a mess," she says. (Like Shah Rukh Khan did in the movie, though his chair did creak when he bid goodbye.) Relationships also end when addicts get bored after the initial high. "When a person gets affirmation from a relationship, there is a euphoria and they can get addicted to that," she says. The brain

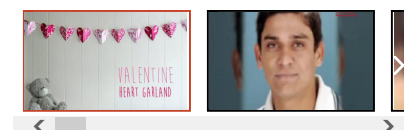
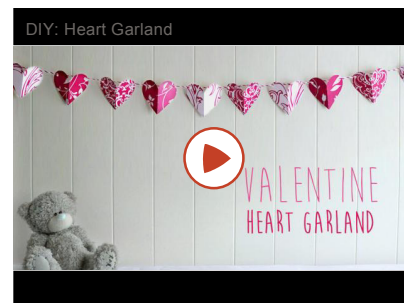
chemistry fires up with a spike in endorphins and oxytocins.

Losing Interest "Then the next stage in a relationship sets in where you see a partner's negatives, and the addict cannot sustain his or her interest," says Kala. The relationship, which started as a way to boost self-esteem, fails and deepens the sense of failure and cuts into the addicts self-esteem. The addict jumps into another relationship to get over this disappointment and the cycle repeats. This leads to a series of unfulfilling relationships. "There will be a breaking point because it is exhausting," says Meera Haran Alva, psychologist and psychotherapist.

"The next is for the person to disassociate from themselves. They stop listening to themselves because they are afraid of self-doubt and their fear of rejection". Meera says that love addiction starts much like the first harmless drink on a Friday evening. "Why not have a good time on Saturday then? Then another on Sunday and it may extend into weekdays," she says. The string of relationships also follows this pattern and particularly for people with addictive personalities. "Such people are prone to substance abuse as well," she says. The personality type could also be someone who is in a child-like state, "underdeveloped ego-state" says Meera.

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"They feed on attention and does not look at the repercussions". Going back to Childhood Meera and Kala believe that neglect or trauma in childhood can lead to such behaviour. "Perhaps there was neglect or abandonment," says Kala. "There could have been parents who cheated on each other or an absent father," says Meera. Meera also believes that changing socio-cultural factors also play a role. "Meeting new people is much easier now," she says, "there are so many channels like Tinder. The attitude to sex and relationships have also changed, it is more about experiences than the long-term goal".

Kala says that if their object of affection is not available, then the person could experience withdrawal symptoms. "Nervousness, anxiety, out-of-control behaviour like shouting in public can all be indicators," she says. If your partner is an addict, he or she could be obsessed with you and may be frequently suspicious. "It can be suffocating," she says. "During the euphoria stage, there will be intense focus on the partner, beyond reason". 'Not a Mental Disorder' But not everyone believes that it is a mental disorder. Infact, it is only referred to as a behavioural pattern or personality type in certain circles. "There is no love addiction," says Dr BN Gangadhar, director of NIMHANS. "There is Delusion of Love that is called Erotomian which is a separate syndrome by itself." This is when you imagine and are certain someone is in love with you, even though the other person does not reciprocate your affections.

"Changing lovers," says Dr Gangadhar, "is not necessarily an illness but a personality disorder called the borderline personality disorder." According to him, they indulge in such behaviour to keep themselves emotionally stable. Priya Pothan, psychologist, too says it is not a mental condition. "It is a style of love," she says. According to her there are six styles of love and this would fall under a combination of two -- eros and mania. "Eros is of people who like the romanticism of love and commitment puts them off. Mania is of people who are in irrational, intense relationships and can be extremely jealous. These people attract similar or diametrically opposite personality types".

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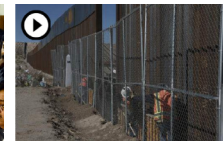


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