

## **COMMENTARIES ON THE CHARACTERISTICS MOST OF US SEEM TO HAVE IN COMMON**

### **Characteristic 8:**

**We became addicted to people, and were unable to distinguish among sex, love, and affection.**

Just as compulsive sex became a drug for us, so too did people. For many of us, romantic obsession and love addiction count among the more subtle and insidious forms of our disease. When we were young, we often found it hard to distinguish an innocent crush from an intoxicating attraction which could activate our compulsion. We may have convinced ourselves that our latest infatuation had to be "the one," and confused the resulting obsession with love. We craved the overwhelming feeling of being in love as we imagined it – the racing heartbeat, the weak knees, the sense of elation and extreme focus on another person. Eventually, a pattern emerged, and we developed detrimental behaviors around these infatuations. Many times, the addictive sexual and romantic attractions we had to people triggered codependent responses in us. Ultimately, the emotional highs and lows we experienced made our lives unmanageable.

Often, trauma and distress from our childhood were the foundation for these unhealthy obsessions. A range of issues – alcoholism in the family, neglect, physical and emotional abuse, incest – possibly contributed to experiences in which our needs were ignored or minimized. The boundaries around sex, love and affection became blurred, and the nature of healthy sexuality and intimacy confusing to us. Some of us came from families that were either unwilling to give us the affection we needed, or were incapable of it. In these ways, our families confirmed our worst fears – that we were indeed unlovable.

We began trying to fill the void where acceptance and self-esteem should have been. If we did not have the opportunity to learn healthy boundaries as children, we had difficulty setting or maintaining them as adults. If another person paid us attention or showed us the slightest affection, it could cause us to obsess about them. We interpreted the smallest kindness as more meaningful attention. Many times, we ignored the actual signals we received from the other person. Instead, we projected our fantasies and needs onto them. We wanted them to conform to our image of what they should be, or what we needed them to be.

We often sent mixed messages and misinterpreted responses. We easily blurred the lines between sexual and non-sexual relationships, often mistaking sex for love, and affection for sexual attraction. Many of us came from family backgrounds where sex was viewed and spoken about negatively (or not spoken about), where love was transactional and conditional, not unconditional, and where affection was rare, or not shown. It was easy to confuse sex with love and affection. We lacked a reference point. We found we needed sex or romantic intrigue to feel loved. These

exaggerated ideas continued into adulthood. We sought love and affection the only way we knew, through an all-consuming focus on another person, wanting to possess them, and to consummate our desires with sexual activity. In essence, we sought deeper connection through sex. When we violated sexual boundaries with our friends, they often withdrew from us, and the relationships suffered or disintegrated entirely, leaving us feeling rejected. People rotated in and out of our lives. Sometimes it seemed that the only friends we had were the people with whom we were sexually involved.

Some of us developed a well-worn habit of engaging in sexual activity as a means of attempting to find love and affection. Yet, the very act of having casual or anonymous sex compulsively thwarted our efforts to build intimate relationships. We found ourselves repeatedly frustrated and let down, blind to the fact that the sex act itself was an exchange, and not genuinely intimate. We were often confused – unable to see the difference between what we wanted and what we were getting. Our sexual encounters frequently left us with a feeling of emptiness and the need to satisfy ourselves in some other, better way, but we didn't know what that would be, or how to go about it.

If we tried dating, many of us found it difficult to establish any real connection with another human being. Often, we chose to be sexual right away, but doing so seemed to forestall any further momentum in building an intimate relationship. The sex became yet another superficial experience, and we were discouraged: we still seemed to be missing out on a deeper, more intimate connection. Still, our addiction told us to do it again – convincing us that the next sex partner would be our best hope for fulfillment.

Some of us became obsessed with strangers, or people we barely knew. We could quickly become "hooked" on another person, and build an intricately-conceived fantasy life about our future with them. These fantasies felt real and possible for us, regardless of whether we knew the person. We objectified them, putting them on a pedestal, convincing ourselves that only *they* had the qualities that would make us happy and solve all our problems. Sometimes these obsessive thoughts remained only fantasies, but they distracted us and made it difficult for us to function well. At other times, we pursued the objects of our desires like any addict would a drug. In our compulsive hunger, some of us saw people as possessions, conquests, or trophies to add to a collection.

In some cases, our perception of a person's overwhelming attractiveness led us to suppress our own personality. We idealized the object of our obsession, with the result that the person held power over us much as an addictive substance would. We found ourselves compelled to pursue people we were interested in to all extremes, even violating our dignity if necessary. Morals, values, integrity, and prior commitments fell by the wayside during our relentless quest. If we achieved our goal and connected with the targets of our desire, we immediately and compulsively immersed ourselves in their lives. Sometimes this was only to discard them when we became obsessed with the next person. As these patterns repeated,

we grew more confused about sex, love, and affection. We had crossed wires in this area, and did not know how to separate out the different elements of our confusion.

### **In Recovery**

We receive the gifts of non-sexual love and non-sexual affection. We learn how sex, love, and affection differ, and we express them appropriately. We set our own boundaries and proceed at an appropriate pace in getting to know people. We are skeptical of instant intimacy, knowing that true intimacy takes time to develop. We let go of the idea that sex or people can somehow cure us of our ills, and seek recovery for our individual circumstances and behaviors.

(Extract from "The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common"  
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