

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

Characteristic 10:

We were drawn to people who were not available to us, or who would reject or abuse us.

Because of our addiction to sex or romance, unavailable people continually gleamed like shiny new objects never quite within our reach. For many of us, low self-esteem and a deep-rooted sense of unworthiness were familiar aspects of our lives. We sought validation through sexual and romantic liaisons with others and were frequently rejected, ultimately feeling worse about ourselves than before. We often ignored signs that a person was unavailable, leading us to feel hurt or abused. We may have had no experience with healthy relationships and few positive role models to emulate, so when we engaged with others, we often made poor choices, many times settling for someone who would merely tolerate us. For some, these choices seemed acceptable, since we felt we were defective and needed to settle for whatever kind of relationship we could get. For others, it was less conscious. We may have found ourselves drawn to those who represented someone from our past, someone who had abused or hurt us, hoping the experience would be different this time. Regardless, we often gravitated toward people who affirmed our feelings of unworthiness by demeaning, disregarding, or abusing us. In some cases, if someone rejected us, it only increased our desire.

Finding a relationship became a kind of mission. Many of us sought out relationships believing that another person could somehow "fix" or "rescue" us, or that we could do the same for them. We often found ourselves attracted to people who were inappropriate as relationship partners in one way or another. If we became aware of character flaws, such as aggressive or abusive tendencies, addictions (including to drugs, alcohol or sex) or a history of infidelity, we tended to ignore or minimize them. Somehow, we believed that only someone with defects would accept us, given how unworthy we felt ourselves to be. Those of us with a history of abuse, or of being treated badly, may have responded to the familiarity of these problems. We often saw abuse as part of the price we must pay to be in a relationship. Part of our sexual compulsion enabled us to deny these flaws, glossing over them as the means to an end in securing a desired relationship.

Another type of attraction sometimes included people who were in committed relationships and who were ultimately unavailable. The fact that someone was married or in a relationship only seemed to add to the allure. In addition, the clandestine nature of an affair often fed our desire for risk and excitement. At the same time, it left us free to pursue other sexual activities, and further enabled us to avoid true commitment. Having an affair sometimes provided affirmation, because we reasoned that if the object of our attraction was willing to endanger their relationship for us, then surely that meant we were worth something. In many

instances, these situations could become abusive if the person strung us along, promising commitment, but not delivering in the end.

Sometimes, the object of our desire ignored us and seemed to be unaware of how much they meant to us. That person's unavailability gnawed at us and made us yearn for them all the more. If they did respond to us, and if we did have sex with them, our sense of self-worth immediately soared, but we also became anxious to hold onto what we had gained. We felt unworthy of anyone's affection, love, and respect. At deep levels, we were convinced that we did not deserve these things, and we may have secretly believed the other person either already knew it, or would soon discover it.

We found ourselves to be magnets for unavailable or abusive people, including active addicts. Nevertheless, our need to be in a relationship with another person caused us to overlook any of the character traits in them that made us feel uncomfortable. Sometimes, we found ourselves allowing a person to behave in ways that violated our personal boundaries. We would make allowances or pretend to ignore their behavior, sometimes hoping that by doing so, we were showing our devotion and commitment, thereby strengthening our connection.

However, we often found that no matter how many concessions we made, our relationship interest only became more demanding, dismissive or abusive. Perhaps they behaved unreliably or were physically or emotionally aggressive. Perhaps they became uncaring, distant, or even absent. Our need to hold onto them gave them power over us, which was sometimes a license to mistreat us, both in private and in public. This abuse hurt us, but we became inured to it and somehow felt it was no more than we merited. Ultimately, most of these relationships failed: in large part because their foundations were unstable.

Eventually, we began to resent these unavailable or abusive people for mistreating us. Often, we blamed ourselves for ignoring the warning signs and our lack of boundaries in our desperate quest for a connection. This pattern of seeking out unavailable people, then of being rejected or abused by them, fueled a destructive cycle of shame. Instead of learning from our mistakes, we found ourselves continuing to pursue the same types of people. We didn't know how to let go of the need for this dysfunctional kind of attachment, and we somehow couldn't accept ourselves as worthy of being treated with honesty, kindness, dignity and respect. Nor could we see ourselves as having a right to intimacy. If we did find a "normal" relationship with another, it seldom lasted. We tended to sabotage it when our sexual compulsion resurfaced, convincing us to take the next risk, or find someone better. To an extent, these patterns reflected the dichotomy in us: we were not available to ourselves, and we were not accepting of ourselves. Deep down inside, many of us simply believed we did not deserve happiness.

In Recovery

We follow a dating plan or pursue healthy relationships, and we gradually find ourselves attracted to appropriate people. We seek to have a healthy relationship

with ourselves and our Higher Power so that we can relate healthily to others. We are not afraid to view first dates as experiments that lead to us asking ourselves, "Do we want a second date with this individual?" We find that it often helps to ask ourselves about a potential new friend or romantic partner, "Is this person truly available to me?" "What is this person saying that I don't want to hear?" "What is this person revealing that I don't want to see?" We take time to get to know the person we are developing a relationship with, and pay heed to potential warning signs. We also take stock of our existing relationships. Is there some deep-rooted incompatibility? We work on our self-esteem and self-respect so that the need to take care of ourselves and safeguard our sexual sobriety outweighs any unhealthy attractions, and other considerations. The former allure of having any relationship with any person just to have sex, or to bolster our sense of self, fades, and comes into proper perspective. We see people clearly as they are, our conception no longer damaged by compulsive fantasy. We respect the boundaries of the committed relationships of others, and of people who do not return our interest.

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