

The Essential Guide TO

Overcoming Obsessive Love

by Monique Belton, Ph.D., and Eileen Bailey



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Dedication

Monique Belton: My deepest gratitude goes to my beloved parents, Mildred and York, for sharing their struggles and triumphs over obsessive love.

Eileen Bailey: This is dedicated to my husband, who is my strength, my inspiration, my lover, and my best friend.

Introduction

The phrase “obsessive love” is deceiving. It isn’t love at all. Love—healthy love—is built on trust and mutual respect. In healthy love relationships, both partners want the other to be happy and secure; each wants their partner to reach for their dreams. They work together. Obsessive love, on the other hand, is built on fear and insecurity. An obsessive lover is afraid. He is afraid of losing his partner, afraid of being rejected, afraid of being abandoned. And it is this fear that drives the relationship. It is this fear that creates jealousy and possessiveness.

Most obsessive relationships don’t last. The partner of the obsessive lover frequently becomes tired of her partner’s overwhelming needs. She feels smothered, unable to go out without a barrage of questioning—or worse. She feels stifled because her own needs are also placed behind the needs of her partner. Most of the time, the partner of the obsessive lover ends the relationship.

This book addresses both sides of an obsessive relationship. For those who are obsessive and don’t want to be—because you’ve seen how it consistently damages your relationships—we talk about events in your past that may have led to your fears. You may have been abandoned as a child or your early years were spent in a dysfunctional family. We discuss how to go about overcoming your fear of rejection so you can enjoy and embrace real love.

For the partners of obsessive lovers, we discuss what emotional needs this relationship might fill for you. It may be that you grew up in a house without love so, in the early stages of the relationship, the intensity of your partner’s feelings makes you feel secure. But as the relationship goes on, you instead feel smothered. This book will help you find ways to make your present relationship better or help you not make the same mistakes in future relationships.

As you read through this book you’ll find many case studies and examples. These are based on discussions of personal histories but are not exact histories. All of the names are fictitious. In addition, we have used “he” to describe the obsessive lover and “she” to refer to the partner of an obsessive lover. This was done for ease of writing only. It is not meant to suggest that obsessive lovers are all male and their partners are all female. Obsessive lovers can be male or female, young or old. They can be in heterosexual or same-sex relationships.

What's in This Book

We have tried to keep this book basic, giving you the information you need to understand how you ended up either as an obsessive lover or the partner of an obsessive lover. We have provided some broad concepts of love and the differences between healthy relationships and obsessive relationships. If we needed to use some technical words, we've provided definitions to help you; and there is a glossary at the end of the book with definitions of many terms used in the book.

This book is divided into five parts. Some sections are addressed to the obsessive lover, some to the partners, and some are written for both partners.

Part 1, Obsessive Love, covers all the basic information. It explains what obsessive love is, what it looks like, and some of the warning signs. We explain how an obsessive love relationship develops, from the initial romantic stage to what happens when the relationship ends. We compare a healthy love relationship to an obsessive love relationship and separate the facts from the myths.

Part 2, The Obsessive Lover, is geared to understanding what causes someone to become obsessive in their relationship. It explains how feelings of security, acceptance, and physical attraction can be confused with love, and why this can develop into obsession. We talk about some of the common obsessive behaviors and provide tips to changing these behaviors. We cover how your fear of rejection can result in self-destructive behaviors, like substance abuse or self-punishment, and what you can do to work on overcoming these behaviors.

Part 3, The Partner of an Obsessive Lover, is for the partners. We cover the fear of confrontation, the emotional ups and downs of living in a controlling relationship, and steps you can take to improve your relationships. We also cover how some of your behaviors can actually contribute to your partner's obsessiveness and how changing your actions can improve your relationship.

Part 4, Freedom from Obsessive Love, discusses how events from your past influence your self-image and how to change your attitude so you have a healthier self-image. We also cover what role counseling and therapy play in overcoming obsessive love and what to expect during counseling sessions. In the last two chapters we address developing healthy relationships, both for the obsessive lovers and their partners. We offer plenty of self-help exercises to help you form a positive self-image.

Part 5, When Obsessive Love Becomes Dangerous, addresses the instances when obsessiveness includes stalking or violence. We explain stalking and domestic violence and the warning signs of danger. We offer advice on how to protect yourself and guide you through some of the basics of using the law to obtain an order of protection.

Extras

We have provided a lot of information on understanding and overcoming obsessive love. Our sidebar offer even more information:

Definition

These help you understand terms related to obsessive love.

True Love

These offer tips and ideas to help you change your behaviors and develop a healthy outlook on love.

Obsession Alert

These provide warnings on behaviors that signal an unhealthy lover or the characteristics of obsessive love, as well as strategies to help overcome obsessive love.

Misc.

Case Studies These are examples of individuals or couples struggling with many of the issues surrounding obsessive love.

Misc.

Did You Know?

These offer facts, figures and statistics about obsessive love.

You'll also see a fourth, name-changing sidebar that presents anecdotes, interesting facts, case histories, or other extended background information you should know.

Acknowledgments

Monique Belton: My deepest gratitude goes to my beloved parents, Mildred and York, who were a constant source of support and belief in me. Thanks, Mom, for being my best friend. I also thank my brother, Marc, for his savvy wisdom and for always reminding me of the bigger picture. I am thankful also for the help of Alyssa McDonald, for her friendship and listening ear.

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Eileen Bailey: Many thanks to my husband and children, who stepped up and managed the household while I took time to write this book. My deepest appreciation and respect for all those professionals who dedicate their lives to help individuals struggling to overcome unhealthy, obsessive relationships especially those working with victims of domestic violence. Thank you to all those who shared their personal stories with me and allowed me to create examples of obsessive love throughout this book based on their experiences. I would also like to thank my agent, Marilyn Allen, for all of her hard work in making this book a reality; and Paul Dinas, Phil Kitchel, and the many other professionals at Alpha Books for their patience and invaluable input as we brought this book from an initial concept to completion.

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Part 1

Obsessive Love

Whether you are an obsessive lover or the partner of one, you probably want to understand what obsessive love is, and why you or your partner is so jealous or just can't stop trying to control the relationship. Or maybe you aren't sure whether your relationship is obsessive; you're wondering whether your or your partner's behaviors are normal or obsessive. Part 1 answers many of these questions.

From understanding how an obsessive relationship develops to the differences between obsessive and healthy love, we help you separate facts from myths and better understand exactly what an obsessive relationship is.

chapter 1

Understanding Obsessive Love

The differences between healthy and obsessive love

Defining acceptable social behavior vs. obsessive behavior

Clues that your relationship isn't right

We all want to find that special person—the one we can spend the rest of our life with. We want to feel special, know that our love is thinking of us and wants to spend time with us. A relationship built on love brings joy into each day. But sometimes it is not love, it is obsession.

Obsessive love is, in reality, not love at all. It is an all-consuming preoccupation with another person. Obsessive lovers believe the person they are obsessed with is the only person who can make them happy.

What Is Obsessive Love?

Some obsessive love relationships are just mildly annoying. For example, Danny met Melissa at work. He was immediately infatuated and asked her out to dinner. Melissa turned Danny down, but week after week, Danny tried again. He couldn't stop thinking about her and couldn't seem to let go of the notion that, if he kept trying, one of these weeks Melissa would say yes. Melissa was amused at times, flattered at times, and annoyed at times, but Danny's obsession seemed harmless—and it never interfered with her job—so she mostly ignored his advances.

At the other end of the spectrum are the obsessive lovers whose behaviors are more extreme. Most obsessive love relationships fall somewhere in between. Obsessive behaviors can interfere with developing healthy relationships and hurt both partners. With help and support, both obsessive lovers and their partners can learn to find healthy love relationships.

True Love

Relationships based on love offer mutual support and compassion. Both partners understand and appreciate the need for each partner to have outside interests. Obsessive lovers often stop their partner from going out in order to keep them in the relationship. Even if your partner is possessive, continue to pursue your own interests.

Each obsessive lover is different: you might be overcome with jealousy, while another may focus so intently on the relationship, he ignores his job and friends. Despite the differences, the majority of obsessive love relationships share some similarities:

- The obsessive lover develops an all-consuming preoccupation with another person.
- Obsessive lovers believe the other person is the one and only love of his life, and only this person can make him happy.
- Obsessive love behaviors are triggered by rejection or abandonment, or the fear of being rejected or abandoned.
- The obsessive lover is convinced his partner cannot be happy without him, and he cannot live without his partner.

Throughout this book, we use the pronouns *he* or *him* to describe the obsessive lover, and *she* or *her* to describe the partner of the obsessive lover. This doesn't mean all obsessive lovers are male and the partners are female. Obsessive lovers can be male or female; they can be young or old. Obsessive love is defined by behaviors, not gender or age.

Obsession Alert

In obsessive love relationships, there is an immediate and intense physical attraction. Obsessive lovers often rush into a sexual relationship before developing an emotional bond with their partner. Because of the intensity of their attraction, they think there is an emotional bond.

Social Norms vs. Obsessive Love Behaviors

There are a number of unspoken, unwritten socially acceptable behaviors. We may not know all the rules, but we know when these rules have been broken or overstepped. For example, Penny and Jack are attracted to one another and decide to go out on a date. Penny meets Jack at a local restaurant, and during dinner they find they share many of the same interests. The evening passes quickly as they discover they both like thriller movies, the beach, and gardening.

At the end of the evening, Penny returns home and tells her roommate she liked Jack; he was nice, he was polite, and he was attentive. If he asks, she would go out with him again. Penny goes to bed, wondering if he will call but looking forward to the plans she has made with friends for the following day.

Jack, meanwhile, is exuberant. He is thrilled he and Penny had so much in common and he can't stop thinking about her. As soon as he arrives home, he texts her, "Had a wonderful time, hope you did, too." Penny is already asleep and doesn't respond. Jack gets worried, thinking Penny doesn't feel the same way. He texts again, an hour later, "Thinking of you," and again the next hour, "Can't wait to see you."

you again.” By the time Penny wakes up, she has 10 unanswered texts on her phone. She thinks Jack is sweet, but she’s overwhelmed and decides it’s a bit much.

True Love

Set boundaries and limitations in the early stages of a relationship if you think it is moving too quickly. By slowing down and spending less time together you can see the relationship more clearly and decide whether you want it to continue.

There are no hard and fast rules that say when or how often you should call after a first date, and, in today’s world of texting and instant communication, an obsessive lover can easily become carried away. Penny just instinctively knows Jack has crossed the line. She might have been flattered receiving one text on her phone, accepting of two, but ten was way too much.

But even though Penny found Jack’s behavior overwhelming, someone else might find it flattering and enjoy the attention, at least in the beginning. You might be lonely, living in a new city; or you might have grown up in a strict household, where displays of love and affection were rare. Unlike

Penny, you quickly respond to the texts, reveling in the feeling of “being wanted.” You might enjoy the rapid texting and the excitement of getting to know someone quickly. The next day, you make plans to meet again. Without realizing it, you could be stepping into an obsessive relationship. It might bring out some obsessive tendencies in you!

Questions about *social norms* will continue throughout your relationship life. A new lover might wonder about your level of commitment, or whether you are ready to make a commitment at all. How much questioning is too much? When does behavior move from acceptable to unacceptable? The answer is different for each relationship and changes at each level of a relationship, but a general rule is if you are uncomfortable, feel threatened, or long for your freedom, your partner has probably overstepped your boundaries. And if you spend all your time worrying about the relationship, where your partner is, and what she is doing, you may be obsessive.

Definition

Social norms are rules within a society or group that determine acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. These rules may be unwritten, but are understood within the group and are different depending on the group’s individual culture. Social norms define appropriate social interactions.

Romantic Love and Obsessive Love Similarities

The early stage of a relationship is known as the romantic stage, when love is easy and carefree. Partners tend to ignore differences and focus on similarities or shared interests. There is suddenly a “we” instead of “me and you,” and it feels wonderful and exhilarating.

Expectations during the romantic stage are high. You begin to envision the future and how the other person fits into it. You believe that most of your needs and wants will be met by the other person. You idealize them. As the relationship continues, you feel ready to make a commitment that says, “I am going to share being in love with you. I will not pursue being in love with anyone else.”

Whether it’s a romantic or obsessive relationship, you feel an intense physical attraction in the early stage. You might express your feelings by holding hands, touching your partner’s arm while talking, or making eye contact from across the room. Gifts, love notes, and other expressions of love are common during this stage. As a new couple, you usually spend as much time as possible together, making time to see each other, even missing other social events. When you can’t be together, you stay in touch via the phone, texting, and/or e-mail. In healthy relationships, this communication is mutual. In obsessive relationships, it is often one-sided.

The following examples compare two new relationships, one healthy and the other showing signs of obsessiveness.

Tom met Marsha through a mutual friend. They began dating and for the next few weeks spent as much time together as possible. One day at work, Marsha was surprised by a dozen roses and a note that said, “Thinking of you.” They talked every day and looked forward to their dates on weekends. When Marsha was out with friends and they asked about Tom, she smiled, and her happiness was evident to everyone. Tom was the same way. After dating for a year, Tom proposed and Marsha accepted.

Around the same time, Alex met Sandy. They also began dating. Alex was head over heels in love. Sandy also received flowers at work, every week. They spoke every day, usually three or four times. Sandy was excited and talked about Alex to all her friends. Alex couldn’t stop thinking about Sandy. They began to spend weekends together almost immediately. Within a few months, however, Sandy was feeling smothered. Alex didn’t want her to do anything by herself and tagged along when she met friends after work, saying he couldn’t bear to be without her. After six months, Sandy broke up with Alex.

Both of these relationships started out the same; the romance, the intense feelings, and the passion were similar. Both couples wanted to be together, both couples thought about each other all the time. But while Tom and Marsha were developing an emotional bond, Alex was holding Sandy too tightly, afraid of losing her. His possessiveness drove her away.

In the beginning of a relationship, obsessive love and healthy romantic love look a whole lot alike. Both are characterized by both partners ...

- Feeling strong physical attraction.

- Having constant thoughts of one another.
- ~~Looking at the relationship through rose-colored glasses, seeing only the good in their partner.~~
- Feeling insecure about the relationship, not sure whether it will end up as long term.

Even in the beginning, you may have doubts or see the warning signs of an obsessive relationship, but you ignore them or make excuses. After all, most early relationships look and feel similar to obsessive relationships. Even if the warning signs are blatantly obvious, other issues, such as recently getting over a neglectful lover, can cause you to ignore the signs and suddenly you are dealing with someone who is obsessed with you.

Obsession Alert

In the early stages of a relationship, the nonobsessive partner is considering the possibility of a shared future, but the obsessive partner has already determined that this is his one and only love who will be his partner for life and begins to make plans for the future. There is no room for doubt.

Warning Signs

You might have nagging doubts about the relationship you are in. Maybe previous partners have called you controlling or accused you of smothering them and you are trying not to ruin this relationship. Or maybe you, as the partner, see some behaviors that are sending up warning flags, but you aren't sure you are being too sensitive.

Misc.

Case Study: Ronnie and Patricia

Obsessive love sometimes begins within hours or days of a new relationship. Ronnie and Patricia met online. After corresponding via e-mail, they agreed to meet, even though they lived far apart. Ronnie flew in from Pennsylvania to Arizona for the weekend. A few weeks later, Patricia flew to Pennsylvania. She began talking about marriage and planning their future—even discussing selling her belongings to move in with Ronnie.

Patricia went home and Ronnie tried to slow things down. Instead of backing away, Patricia showed up again, unannounced, intending to spend a week with Ronnie. He finally broke it off and she returned to Arizona. Ronnie stopped accepting her calls, but she called his friends every few days to find out what he was doing. Not until months later did she finally stop calling.

Read each of the following questions. For each one that describes your relationship, read the short description following for more information, ideas on making the relationship work, or deciding to leave.

Is the relationship moving quickly?

If after a few weeks you think you have found the love of your life, or your partner is already professing undying love, it may be a sign of obsessiveness. You might want to set some boundaries, slow down a bit, or put limits on how much time you spend together.

Do you want to spend every moment with someone? Do you worry about the relationship when you are not together? Does your partner want to go everywhere with you or stay in constant contact when you're not together?

The insecurities and uncertainties that accompany any new love often bring out some obsessive qualities, but there is a difference between wanting to be with someone and needing to be with her to feel secure. If you feel like you need this relationship to survive, the information and self-help exercises throughout this book will help you determine why you can't get past your insecurities in your relationships.

Do you panic at the thought of losing this person? Or does your partner want constant reassurance that you are committed to the relationship?

Obsessive lovers often make “deals” saying they will change something or do something in order to make their partner stay in a relationship; others use guilt. If you remain in a relationship not because you want to, but because staying is easier than leaving, it's probably a sign of problems to come. If someone needs constant reassurance—no matter how much you try—it isn't going to be enough to make him feel secure. You need to decide if this is the type of relationship you want.

Do you want to “fix” your partner? Or does your partner continuously find little things you do wrong or criticize you because he wants you to be better?

An obsessive lover holds on to their relationship by making their partner believe that no one else could ever care more about her. He cares enough to make sure you are the best person possible—and to do that, he finds everything you do wrong and lets you know what to do to improve yourself. Constant criticism kills your self-confidence, leaving you to believe no one else would want you because you are “too fat,” “too lazy,” or “too stupid.” Chapter 16 provides suggestions and exercises to improve your self-image.

Are you concerned every time your partner gets together with friends or relatives because they may try to persuade her not to be with you? Or does your partner complain every time you make plans to see friends or attend a family function? Does he put your friends and family down or tell you they are not good for you or are taking advantage of you?

Obsessive lovers need you to themselves. They see every other person in your life as competition for

your time and a threat to your relationship. You should never need to give up your friends or your interests for another person. Continue to pursue activities outside the relationship, while offering reassurance to your partner.

Does your relationship go in cycles, from fights to making up or from turbulence to peace, on a regular basis? Does your partner act mean and hurtful one day and sweet the next day?

The obsessive lover knows when he has gone too far and is in danger of losing the relationship. He then covers his back, being extra attentive and extra nice, to show how sorry he is. The obsessed partner is drawn back in, hoping this is finally the last time—the turning point. This behavior might not be conscious; it can be a learned behavior. The obsessive lover goes too far, then as his partner reacts to his concern and apologies, he learns what will work to bring his partner back.

Obsession Alert

Be careful if your partner won't respect your privacy. Obsessive lovers frequently don't respect boundaries; they may snoop into your personal life or even contact friends and relatives to find out information. This behavior can begin within days or weeks of the start of relationship or may not show up until some event, such as becoming engaged or going away to school, triggers the obsessive feelings.

Usually relationships that begin this way continue this way. When you are in an obsessive relationship, it is hard to see the behaviors as wrong or abnormal, and the longer you stay the more normal the obsessive behaviors and your reactions become. Your thoughts are focused on making sure your partner knows how much you care, rather than on your own selfgrowth and happiness. You might avoid social situations with friends or co-workers, or become more and more frantic about making sure your house is perfectly cleaned or dinner is just right.

As the obsessive lover, you justify your behaviors because keeping and controlling your relationship is the most important thing in your life. It is all that matters, and the end justifies the means. You will do whatever it takes to make sure the relationship continues.

Fantasy Obsessions

Obsessive love often forms inside of a relationship, when the fear of rejection overcomes all sense of security and an obsessive lover acts in irrational ways to hold on to a partner, even when both are unhappy. But sometimes obsessive love develops in other situations, when the obsessive lover is infatuated with someone he barely knows or may have never even met.

I Want You, So You Want Me

You meet someone at the coffee shop, maybe even have one or two dates, but no relationship develops. Still, you feel a deep physical attraction. As an obsessive lover, you feel drawn to this person and begin to mistake these feelings for love. You can't stop thinking of her and visiting the place you met again and again, hoping to see her again. You put emphasis on little things. She might have given you a compliment or touched your arm when talking to you. These, to you, are signs of interest.

Marian is an example of this type of obsessive love. Marian met John at the laundromat on a Thursday evening. Marian had seen him there before and thought he was cute, but had never spoken to him. But that evening they stood side by side, loading clothes into the washers, and began talking. While they both waited for their clothes to finish, they laughed and joked. By the time they were done, she had given him her phone number. But John never called. Marian was sure something was wrong, that he meant to call but lost her number, or maybe he had misunderstood. In Marian's mind, John had felt the same spark she did. Over and over she told herself, "He must have felt it, too." She couldn't understand why he didn't call; it made no sense.

Marian could barely think of anything else—seeing John again was all that mattered. She drove by the laundromat every night. She turned down invitations from friends to do anything on Thursdays because she "needed" to do her wash every week at the same time, just in case John was there.

Marian's situation is not uncommon. Any one of us can meet someone and instantly wonder about the possibilities; the issue is whether we become obsessive. It's not the feeling but how much, how often, and what actions we take that determines whether we are infatuated or obsessed.

Imaginary Relationships

Although less common, some people become infatuated with someone they've never met. Picture the teenage girl, "in love" with the latest heartthrob. She imagines herself meeting him and falling in love. She might write letters to him, research him on the Internet, write his name over and over, and fantasize about their future together. We have all heard stories about obsessed fans who go to great lengths to get the attention of their fantasy lover.

Fantasy relationships don't have to involve a superstar. It could be your neighbor down the street or a co-worker, someone you don't know and have never shared a relationship with. But as time goes on, the fantasy grows. You create an entire relationship in your mind, imagining places you would go together and conversations you would have.

Obsession Alert

If you are not able to function or complete regular daily activities such as caring for yourself, going to work, or completing normal chores because of continuous thoughts about someone else, you may be obsessed. Even if you continue to go to work and care for yourself, but your

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