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ROBIN NORWOOD

**WOMEN
WHO
LOVE
TOO
MUCH**

**When You
Keep Wishing
and Hoping
He'll Change**

"Packed with understanding,
hope, and above all, help."
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 POCKET • NONFIC • 62049 • 5 • \$4.50

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PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

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Stanton Peele quote excerpted from a broadcast over University of Minnesota Public Radio Station KUOM, "When Love Is the Drug," broadcast in 1983.



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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

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Published by arrangement with Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc./St. Martin's Press, Inc.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-4654

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For information address St. Martin's Press, Inc.

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN: 0-671-62049-5

First Pocket Books printing June, 1986

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Printed in the U.S.A.

This book is dedicated to the Anonymous programs in gratitude for the miracle of recovery that they offer.

Acknowledgments

THREE PEOPLE ARE OWED MY DEEPEST THANKS FOR THEIR inspiring commitment to the creation of this book. First, there is my husband, Bob Calvert, who cooked dinner every night during the final year of this book's development, and who read everything I wrote—as many as six, seven, or even more times—yet remained energetic, positive, and encouraging, tactfully delivering invaluable feedback, helpful suggestions, and ever-so-gentle criticisms of the work in progress. In spite of the considerable time, effort, and attention that writing this book cost both of us, he was always wonderfully supportive of the project both in words and in deeds.

Second, there is my typist, Stephanie Stevens, who demonstrated a nearly psychic ability to decipher reams of my handwritten material, accompanied by complicated format directions. From these piles of scribbled sheets she consistently produced beautiful manuscript pages in time for every deadline, all the while enthusiastically responding to the material she was typing.

And third, I must thank Laura Golden, the editor at Tarcher, who first saw the manuscript and believed in it. Laura's clear understanding of the concept of loving too much, as well as her insightful, inspiring, and unflagging guidance of a first-time author, vastly improved the relevance, coherence, and overall quality of the book. Working with her has been a great blessing and delight.

Each of these people believed in this book before it was a reality, and I am grateful to them all for their dedication, love, and support.

Preface

WHEN BEING IN LOVE MEANS BEING IN PAIN WE ARE LOVING too much. When most of our conversations with intimate friends are about him, his problems, his thoughts, his feelings—and nearly all our sentences begin with “he . . .”, we are loving too much.

When we excuse his moodiness, bad temper, indifference, or put-downs as problems due to an unhappy childhood and we try to become his therapist, we are loving too much.

When we read a self-help book and underline all the passages we think would help *him*, we are loving too much.

When we don't like many of his basic characteristics, values, and behaviors, but we put up with them thinking that if we are only attractive and loving enough he'll want to change for us, we are loving too much.

When our relationship jeopardizes our emotional well-being and perhaps even our physical health and safety, we are definitely loving too much.

In spite of all its pain and dissatisfaction, loving too much is such a common experience for many women that we almost believe it is the way intimate relationships are supposed to be. Most of us have loved too much at least once and for many of us it has been a recurrent theme in our lives. Some of us have become so obsessed with our partner and our relationship that we are barely able to function.

In this book we will take a hard look at the reasons why so many women, looking for someone to love them, seem inevitably to find unhealthy, unloving partners instead. And we will explore why, once we know a relationship is not meeting our needs, we nevertheless have such difficulty ending it. We will see that loving turns into loving too

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much when our partner is inappropriate, uncaring, or unavailable and yet we cannot give him up—in fact we want him, we need him even more. We will come to understand how our wanting to love, our yearning for love, our loving itself becomes an addiction.

Addiction is a frightening word. It conjures up images of heroin users jabbing needles into their arms and leading obviously self-destructive lives. We don't like the word and we don't want to apply the concept to the way we relate to men. But many, many of us have been "man junkies" and, like any other addict, we need to admit the severity of our problem before we can begin to recover from it.

If you have ever found yourself obsessed with a man, you may have suspected that the root of that obsession was not love but fear. We who love obsessively are full of fear—fear of being alone, fear of being unlovable and unworthy, fear of being ignored or abandoned or destroyed. We give our love in the desperate hope that the man with whom we're obsessed will take care of our fears. Instead, the fears—and our obsessions—deepen until giving love in order to get it back becomes a driving force in our lives. And because our strategy doesn't work we try, we love even harder. We love too much.

I first recognized the phenomenon of "loving too much" as a specific syndrome of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors after several years of counseling alcohol and drug abusers. Having conducted hundreds of interviews with addicts and their families, I made a surprising discovery. Sometimes the patients I interviewed grew up in troubled families, sometimes they did not; but their partners nearly always came from severely troubled families in which they had experienced greater than normal stress and pain. By struggling to cope with their addictive mates, these partners (known in the alcoholism treatment field as "co-alcoholics") were unconsciously recreating and reliving significant aspects of their childhood.

It was mostly from the wives and girlfriends of addictive men that I began to understand the nature of loving too much. Their personal histories revealed their need for both the superiority and the suffering they experienced in their "savior" role and helped me make sense of the depth of their addiction to a man who was in turn addicted to a substance. It was clear that both partners in these couples were equally in need of help, indeed that both were literally dying of their addictions, he from the effects of chemical abuse, she of the effects of extreme stress.

These co-alcoholic women clarified for me the incredible power and influence their childhood experiences had on their adult patterns of relating to men. They have something to tell all of us who have loved too much about why we have developed our predilection for troubled relationships, how we perpetuate our problems, and most importantly how we can change and get well.

I do not intend to imply that women are the only ones who love too much. Some men practice this obsession with relationships with as much fervor as any woman could, and their feelings and behaviors issue from the same kinds of childhood experiences and dynamics. However, most men who have been damaged in childhood do not develop an addiction to relationships. Due to an interplay of cultural and biological factors, they usually try to protect themselves and avoid their pain through pursuits which are more external than internal, more impersonal than personal. Their tendency is to become obsessed with work, sports, or hobbies while, due to the cultural and biological forces working on her, the woman's tendency is to become obsessed with a relationship—perhaps with just such a damaged and distant man.

Hopefully this book will be of help to *anyone* who loves too much, but it is primarily written for women because loving too much is primarily a female phenomenon. Its purpose is very specific: to help women with destructive patterns of relating to men recognize that fact, understand

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the origin of those patterns, and gain the tools for changing their lives.

But if you are a woman who loves too much, I feel it only fair to caution you that this is not going to be an easy book to read. Indeed, if the definition fits and you nevertheless breeze through this book unstirred and unaffected, or you find yourself bored or angry, or unable to concentrate on the material presented here, or only able to think about how much it would help someone else, I suggest that you try reading the book again at a later time. We all need to deny what is too painful or too threatening for us to accept. Denial is a natural means of self-protection, operating automatically and unbidden. Perhaps at a later reading you will be able to face your own experiences and deeper feelings.

Read slowly, allowing yourself to relate both intellectually and emotionally to these women and their stories. The case histories in this book may seem extreme to you. I assure you that the opposite is true. The personalities, characteristics, and histories that I have encountered among hundreds of women I have known personally and professionally who fit the category of loving too much are by no means exaggerated here. Their actual stories are far more complicated and full of pain. If their problems seem much more serious and distressing than yours, let me say that your initial reaction is typical of most of my clients. Each believes that her problem is "not that bad," even as she relates with compassion to the plight of other women who, in her opinion, have "real" troubles.

It is one of the ironies of life that we women can respond with such sympathy and understanding to the pain in one another's lives while remaining so blinded to (and by) the pain in our own. I know this only too well, having been a woman who loved too much most of my life until the toll to my physical and emotional health was so severe that I was forced to take a hard look at my pattern of relating to men. I have spent the last several years

working hard to change that pattern. They have been the most rewarding years of my life.

I hope that for all of you who love too much this book will not only help you to become more aware of the reality of your condition, but will encourage you to begin to change it as well, by redirecting your loving attention away from your obsession with a man and toward your own recovery and your own life.

Here a second warning is appropriate. There is in this book, as in so many "self-help" books, a list of steps to take in order to change. Should you decide that you really do want to follow these steps, it will require—as all therapeutic change does—years of work and nothing short of your total commitment. There are no shortcuts out of the pattern of loving too much in which you are caught. It is a pattern learned early and practiced well, and to give it up will be frightening, threatening, and constantly challenging. This warning is not meant to discourage you. After all, you will most certainly be facing a struggle throughout those years ahead if you don't change your pattern of relating. But in that case, your struggle will not be toward growth but merely toward survival. The choice is yours. If you choose to begin the process of recovery, you will change from a woman who loves someone else so much it hurts into a woman who loves herself enough to stop the pain.

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1 • Loving the Man Who Doesn't Love Back

VICTIM OF LOVE,
I SEE A BROKEN HEART.
YOU'VE GOT YOUR STORY TO TELL.

VICTIM OF LOVE;
IT'S SUCH AN EASY PART
AND YOU KNOW HOW TO PLAY IT
SO WELL.

. . . I THINK YOU KNOW
WHAT I MEAN.
YOU'RE WALKING THE WIRE
OF PAIN AND DESIRE,
LOOKING FOR LOVE IN BETWEEN.

—VICTIM OF LOVE

IT WAS JILL'S FIRST SESSION, AND SHE LOOKED DOUBTFUL. Pert and petite, with blond Orphan Annie curls, she sat stiffly on the edge of the chair facing me. Everything about her seemed round: the shape of her face, her slightly plump figure, and most particularly her blue eyes, which took in the framed degrees and certificates on my office wall. She asked a few questions about my graduate school and counseling license, and then mentioned, with obvious pride, that she was in law school.

There was a brief silence. She looked down at her folded hands.

"I guess I'd better start talking about why I'm here," she spoke rapidly, using the momentum of her words to gather courage.

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"I'm doing this—seeing a therapist, I mean—because I'm really unhappy. It's men, of course. I mean, me and men. I always do something to drive them away. Everything starts out fine. They really pursue me and everything, and then after they get to know me"—she tensed visibly against the coming pain—"it all falls apart."

She looked up at me now, her eyes shining with held-back tears, and continued more slowly.

"I want to know what I'm doing wrong, what I have to change about me—because I'll do it. I'll do whatever it takes. I'm really a hard worker." She began to speed up again.

"It's not that I'm unwilling. I just *don't know* why this keeps happening to me. I'm afraid to get involved anymore. I mean, it's nothing but pain every time. I'm beginning to be really afraid of men."

Shaking her head, the round curls bouncing, she explained with vehemence, "I don't want that to happen, because I'm very lonely. In law school I have lots of responsibility, and then I'm working to support myself too. These demands could keep me busy all the time. In fact, that's pretty much all I did for the past year—work, go to school, study, and sleep. But I missed having a man in my life."

Quickly she continued. "Then I met Randy, when I was visiting friends in San Diego two months ago. He's an attorney, and we met one night when my friends took me out dancing. Well, we just hit it off right away. There was so much to talk about—except that I guess I did most of the talking. But he seemed to *like* that. And it was just so great to be with a man who was interested in things that were important to me, too."

Her brows gathered together. "He seemed really attracted to me. You know, asking if I was married—I'm divorced, have been for two years—if I lived alone. That kind of stuff."

I could imagine how Jill's eagerness must have shown as

she chatted brightly with Randy over the blaring music that first night. And the eagerness with which she welcomed him a week later when he extended a business trip to Los Angeles an extra hundred miles to visit her. At dinner she offered to let him sleep at her apartment so that he could postpone the long drive back until the next day. He accepted her invitation and their affair began that night.

"It was great. He let me cook for him and really enjoyed being looked after. I pressed his shirt for him before he dressed that morning. I love looking after a man. We got along beautifully." She smiled wistfully. But as she continued her story it became clear that Jill had almost immediately become completely obsessed with Randy.

When he returned to his San Diego apartment, the phone was ringing. Jill warmly informed him that she had been worried about his long drive and was relieved to know he was safely home. When she thought he sounded a little bemused at her call, she apologized for bothering him and hung up, but a gnawing discomfort began to grow in her, fueled by the awareness that once again she cared far more than the man in her life did.

"Randy told me once not to pressure him or he would just disappear. I got so scared. It was all up to me. I was supposed to love him and leave him alone at the same time. I couldn't do it, so I just got more and more scared. The more I panicked, the more I chased him."

Soon Jill was calling him almost nightly. Their arrangement was to take turns calling, but often when it was Randy's turn the hour would grow late and she would become too restless to stand it. Sleep was out of the question anyway, so she would dial him. These conversations were as vague as they were lengthy.

"He would say he'd forgotten, and I would say, 'How can you forget?' After all, I never forgot. So then we'd get into talking about why, and it seemed like he was afraid to get close to me and I wanted to help him get through that.

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He kept saying he didn't know what he wanted in life, and I would try to help him clarify what the issues were for him." Thus, Jill fell into the role of "shrink" with Randy, trying to help him be more emotionally present for her.

That he did not want her was something she could not accept. She had already decided that he needed her.

Twice, Jill flew to San Diego to spend the weekend with him; on the second visit, he spent their Sunday together ignoring her, watching television and drinking beer. It was one of the worst days she could remember.

"Was he a heavy drinker?" I asked Jill. She looked startled.

"Well, no, not really. I don't know, actually. I never really thought about it. Of course, he was drinking the night I met him, but that's only natural. After all, we were in a bar. Sometimes when we talked on the phone I could hear ice tinkling in a glass and I'd tease him about it—you know, drinking alone and all that. Actually, I was never with him when he wasn't drinking, but I just assumed that he liked to drink. That's normal, isn't it?"

She paused, thinking. "You know, sometimes on the phone he would talk funny, especially for an attorney. Really vague and imprecise; forgetful, not consistent. But I never thought of it as happening because he was drinking. I don't know how I explained it to myself. I guess I just didn't let myself think about it."

She looked at me sadly.

"Maybe he *did* drink too much, but it must have been because I bored him. I guess I just wasn't interesting enough and he didn't really want to be with me." Anxiously, she continued. "My husband never wanted to be around me—that was obvious!" Her eyes brimmed over as she struggled on. "Neither did my father. . . . What is it in me? Why do they all feel that way about me? What am I doing wrong?"

The moment Jill became aware of a problem between her and someone important to her, she was willing not

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only to try and solve it but also to take responsibility for having created it. If Randy, her husband, and her father all failed to love her, she felt it must be because of something she had done or failed to do.

Jill's attitudes, feelings, behavior, and life experiences were typical of a woman for whom being in love means being in pain. She exhibited many of the characteristics that women who love too much have in common. Regardless of the specific details of their stories and struggles, whether they have endured a long and difficult relationship with one man or have been involved in a series of unhappy partnerships with many men, they share a common profile. Loving too much does not mean loving too many men, or falling in love too often, or having too great a depth of genuine love for another. It means, in truth, obsessing about a man and calling that obsession love, allowing it to control your emotions and much of your behavior, realizing that it negatively influences your health and well-being, and yet finding yourself unable to let go. It means measuring the degree of your love by the depth of your torment.

As you read this book, you may find yourself identifying with Jill, or with another of the women whose stories you encounter, and you may wonder if you, too, are a woman who loves too much. Perhaps, though your problems with men are similar to theirs, you will have difficulty associating yourself with the "labels" that apply to some of these women's backgrounds. We all have strong emotional reactions to words like *alcoholism*, *incest*, *violence*, and *addiction*, and sometimes we cannot look at our own lives realistically because we are so afraid of having these labels apply to us or to those we love. Sadly, our inability to use the words when they do apply often precludes our getting appropriate help. On the other hand, those dreaded labels may not apply in your life. Your childhood may have involved problems of a subtler nature. Maybe your father, while providing a financially secure home, nevertheless

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deeply disliked and distrusted women, and his inability to love you kept you from loving yourself. Or your mother's attitude toward you may have been jealous and competitive in private even though she showed you off and bragged about you in public, so that you ended up needing to do well to gain her approval and yet fearing the hostility your success generated in her.

We cannot cover in this one book the myriad ways families can be unhealthy—that would require several volumes of a rather different nature. It is important to understand, however, that what all unhealthy families have in common is their inability to discuss *root* problems. There may be other problems that *are* discussed, often ad nauseum, but these often cover up the underlying secrets that make the family dysfunctional. It is the degree of secrecy—the inability to talk about the problems—rather than their severity, that defines both how dysfunctional a family becomes and how severely its members are damaged.

A dysfunctional family is one in which members play rigid roles and in which communication is severely restricted to statements that fit these roles. Members are not free to express a full range of experiences, wants, needs, and feelings, but rather must limit themselves to playing that part which accommodates those played by other family members. Roles operate in all families, but as circumstances change, the members must also change and adapt in order for the family to continue to remain healthy. Thus, the kind of mothering appropriate for a one-year-old will be highly inappropriate for a thirteen-year-old, and the mothering role must alter to accommodate reality. In dysfunctional families, major aspects of reality are denied, and roles remain rigid.

When no one can discuss what affects every family member individually as well as the family as a whole—indeed, when such discussion is forbidden implicitly (the subject is changed) or explicitly (“We don’t talk about