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WOMEN
WHO
LOVE
TOO
MUCH

ROBIN NORWOOD

'Really brilliant . . . I absolutely related to it'

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**WOMEN
WHO
LOVE
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Robin Norwood is the internationally bestselling author of *Women Who Love Too Much*, *Letters from Women Who Love Too Much*, *Daily Meditations for Women Who Love Too Much* and *Why Me, Why This, Why Now?* She was formerly in private practice as a licensed marriage, family and child therapist, specialising in chemical dependency and co-dependency. She now lives in California, USA.

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Also by Robin Norwood

Why Me, Why This, Why Now?

Letters From Women Who Love Too Much

Daily Meditations for Women Who Love Too Much

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

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Introduction

FOR NEARLY A QUARTER of a century, women have been turning to this book you hold in your hands for relief from their pain regarding men and love. First in the United States, and then throughout the world and in twenty-five languages, it has helped women in China and Brazil, France and Finland, Ireland and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Serbia—women by the millions whose lives are linked across cultural, socio-economic, educational and generational lines by their need for help with loving too much.

Thankfully, attitudes have changed radically since *Women Who Love Too Much* first appeared. No longer regarded as the natural, normal state of things, loving too much is now widely recognized as a dangerous and debilitating condition. But that recognition has not been sufficient to halt the defining feelings and behaviors of this obsession.

Trudi, who you'll meet in chapter two and again in chapter eleven, would no longer look or dress or even eat the way she did in the mid-1980s when this book was first published—and she certainly wouldn't spend her summer waiting at home by the phone for the call that never comes. Today's Trudi might even be able to acknowledge that perhaps she has a problem with loving too much as she repeatedly checks her cell phone in hope of a message from *him*, then emails or texts him with another desperate message of her own. Surface details in behavior may have changed somewhat but the basic obsession is as strong as ever.

Why, if we now freely put a name to our problem, can't we overcome it? The damaged personality which is at the root of loving too much hasn't the power needed to heal itself any more than we can lift ourselves by our own bootstraps. We must have help to change what is so deeply

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ingrained in our character and that is where this book comes in. For those who *want* to change, it provides that help.

This new edition of *Women Who Love Too Much*, now with an updated Sources of Help appendix and an expanded Suggested Reading list, both validates and celebrates the proven track record as well as the continuing relevance, immediacy, and efficacy of a message that has worked over time and around the world. This book, with its stories specific to relationship addiction and its guidelines for recovery therefrom, has enabled women everywhere to change their lives. Use it to help you change yours.

Original 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 much when our partner is inappropriate, uncaring, or unavailable

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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 obsession—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 chemically dependent 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.

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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

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purpose is very specific: to help women with destructive patterns of relating to men recognize that fact, understand 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

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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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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.

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

“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,

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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

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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. 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

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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 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

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in your life. Your childhood may have involved problems of a subtler nature. Maybe your father, while providing a financially secure home, nevertheless 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,

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when such discussion is forbidden implicitly (the subject is changed) or explicitly (“We don’t talk about those things!”)—we learn not to believe in our own perceptions or feelings. Because our family denies our reality, we begin to deny it too. And this severely impairs the development of our basic tools for living life and for relating to people and situations. It is this basic impairment that operates in women who love too much. We become unable to discern when someone or something is not good for us. The situations and people that others would naturally avoid as dangerous, uncomfortable, or unwholesome do not repel us, because we have no way of evaluating them realistically or self-protectively. We do not trust our feelings, or use them to guide us. Instead, we are actually drawn to the very dangers, intrigues, dramas, and challenges that others with healthier and more balanced backgrounds would naturally eschew. And through this attraction we are further damaged, because much of what we are attracted to is a replication of what we lived with growing up. We get hurt all over again.

No one becomes such a woman, a woman who loves too much, by accident. To grow up as a female in this society and in such a family can generate some predictable patterns. The following characteristics are typical of women who love too much, women like Jill and perhaps like you, too.

1. Typically, you come from a dysfunctional home in which your emotional needs were not met.
2. Having received little real nurturing yourself, you try to fill this unmet need vicariously by becoming a care-giver, especially to men who appear, in some way, needy.
3. Because you were never able to change your parent(s) into the warm, loving caretaker(s) you longed for, you respond deeply to the familiar type of emotionally unavailable man whom you can again try to change, through your love.

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4. Terrified of abandonment, you will do anything to keep a relationship from dissolving.
5. Almost nothing is too much trouble, takes too much time, or is too expensive if it will “help” the man you are involved with.
6. Accustomed to lack of love in personal relationships, you are willing to wait, hope, and try harder to please.
7. You are willing to take far more than 50 percent of the responsibility, guilt, and blame in any relationship.
8. Your self-esteem is critically low, and deep inside you do not believe you deserve to be happy. Rather, you believe you must earn the right to enjoy life.
9. You have a desperate need to control your men and your relationships, having experienced little security in childhood. You mask your efforts to control people and situations as “being helpful.”
10. In a relationship, you are much more in touch with your dream of how it could be than with the reality of your situation.
11. You are addicted to men and to emotional pain.
12. You may be predisposed emotionally and often biochemically to becoming addicted to drugs, alcohol, and/or certain foods, particularly sugary ones.
13. By being drawn to people with problems that need fixing, or by being enmeshed in situations that are chaotic, uncertain, and emotionally painful, you avoid focusing on your responsibility to yourself.
14. You may have a tendency toward episodes of depression, which you try to forestall through the excitement provided by an unstable relationship.

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15. You are not attracted to men who are kind, stable, reliable, and interested in you. You find such “nice” men boring.

Jill displayed nearly all of these characteristics, to a greater or lesser degree. It was as much because she embodied so many of the above attributes as because of anything else she may have told me about him that I suspected Randy might have a drinking problem. Women with this type of emotional makeup are consistently drawn to men who are emotionally unavailable for one reason or another. Being addicted is a primary way of being emotionally unavailable.

Right from the start, Jill was willing to take more responsibility than Randy for initiating the relationship and keeping it going. Like so many women who love too much, she was obviously a very responsible person, a high achiever who was succeeding in many areas of her life, but who nevertheless had little self-esteem. The realization of her academic and career goals could not counterbalance the personal failure she endured in her love relationships. Every phone call Randy forgot to make dealt a serious blow to her fragile self-image, which she then worked heroically to shore up by trying to extract signs of caring from him. Her willingness to take full blame for a failed relationship was typical, as was her inability to assess the situation realistically and take care of herself by pulling out when the lack of reciprocity became apparent.

Women who love too much have little regard for their personal integrity in a love relationship. They pour their energies into changing the other person’s behavior or feelings toward them through desperate manipulations, such as Jill’s expensive long-distance phone calls and flights to San Diego (remember, her budget was extremely limited). Her long-distance “therapy sessions” with him were much more an attempt to make him into the man she needed him to be than to help him discover who he was. Actually, Randy

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did not want to help in discovering who he was. If he had been interested in such a journey of self-discovery, he would have done most of the work himself, rather than sitting by passively while Jill tried to force him to analyze himself. She made these efforts because her only other alternative was to recognize and accept him for what he was—a man who was careless of her feelings and of the relationship.

Let's return to Jill's session to better understand what brought her to my office that day.

She was talking about her father now.

"He was such a stubborn man. I swore that someday I'd win an argument with him." She reflected for a moment.

"I never did, though. That's probably why I went into law. I just love the idea of arguing a case and *winning!*" She flashed a wide smile at the thought and then sobered again.

"Do you know what I did once? I made him tell me that he loved me, and I made him give me a hug." Jill was trying to relate it as a light-hearted anecdote from her growing-up years, but it didn't play that way. The shadow of a hurt young girl came through.

"It never would have happened if I hadn't forced him. But he did love me. He just couldn't show me. He never was able to say it again. So I'm really glad I made him. Otherwise I never would have heard him say it to me. I had been waiting years and years. I was eighteen when I said to him, 'You're going to tell me that you love me,' and I wouldn't move until he had said it. Then I asked him for a hug and really I had to hug him first. He just sort of squeezed back and patted my shoulder a bit, but that's okay. I really needed that from him." The tears were back now, this time spilling over her round cheeks.

"Why was that so hard for him to do? It seems like such a *basic* thing, to be able to tell your daughter that you love her."

Again she studied her folded hands.

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“I tried so hard. That’s even why I argued and fought so hard with him. I thought if I ever won, he’d have to be proud of me. He’d have to admit I was good. I wanted his approval, which I guess means his love, more than anything in the world. . . .”

It became clear in talking further with her that Jill’s family blamed her father’s rejection of her on the fact that he had wanted a son and had gotten a daughter instead. This facile explanation of his coldness toward his child was far easier for all of them, including Jill, to accept than was the truth about him. But after considerable time in therapy, Jill recognized that her father had had close emotional ties with *no one*, that he had been virtually incapable of expressing warmth or love or approval to anyone in his personal sphere. There had always been “reasons” for his emotional withholding, such as quarrels and differences of opinion or irreversible facts such as Jill’s having been a girl. Every member of the family chose to accept those reasons as legitimate rather than to examine the consistently distant quality of their relationships with him.

Jill actually found it harder to accept her father’s basic inability to love than to continue in her self-blame. As long as the fault was hers, there was also hope—that someday she could change herself sufficiently to bring about a change in him.

It is true for all of us that when an emotionally painful event occurs, and we tell ourselves it is our fault, we are actually saying that we have control of it: if we change, the pain will stop. This dynamic is behind much of the self-blame in women who love too much. By blaming ourselves, we hold on to the hope that we will be able to figure out what we are doing wrong and correct it, thereby controlling the situation and stopping the pain.

This pattern in Jill became clearly illuminated during a session soon thereafter when she described her marriage.

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Inexorably drawn to someone with whom she could recreate the emotionally deprived climate of her growing-up years with her father, her marriage was an opportunity for her to try again to win withheld love.

As Jill recounted how she met her husband, I thought of a maxim I'd heard from a fellow therapist: Hungry people make poor shoppers. Desperately hungry for love and approval, and familiar with rejection though never identifying it as such, Jill was destined to find Paul.

She told me, "We met in a bar. I had been washing my clothes in a laundromat and went next door for a few minutes, to this sleazy little place. Paul was shooting pool and asked me if I wanted to play. I said sure, and that's how it started. He asked me out. I said no, that I didn't go out with men I met in bars. Well, he followed me back to the laundromat and just kept talking to me. I finally gave him my phone number and we went out the next night.

"Now, you're not going to believe this, but we ended up living together two weeks later. He had nowhere to live and I had to move out of my apartment, so we got a place together. And none of it was that great, not the sex or the companionship or anything. But after a year went by, my mother was getting nervous about what I was doing, so we got married." Jill was shaking those curls again.

In spite of this casual beginning, she soon became obsessed. Because Jill had grown up trying to make whatever was wrong right, she naturally carried that pattern of thinking and behaving into her marriage.

"I tried so hard. I mean, I really loved him and I was determined to make him love me back. I was going to be the perfect wife. I cooked and cleaned like crazy, and I was trying to go to school, too. A lot of the time he didn't work. He would lie around or disappear for days at a time. That was hell, the waiting and wondering. But I learned not to ask where he had been because . . ." She hesitated, shifting in the

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chair. “It’s hard for me to admit this. I was so sure I could make it all work if I just tried hard enough, but sometimes I’d get angry after he disappeared and then he’d hit me.

“I’ve never told anyone about this before. I’ve always been so ashamed. I just never saw myself that way, you know? As someone who would let herself be hit.”

Jill’s marriage ended when her husband found another woman on one of his extended absences from home. In spite of the agony the marriage had become, Jill was devastated when Paul left.

“I knew that whoever the woman was, she was everything I wasn’t. I could actually see why Paul left me. I felt like I had nothing to offer him or anyone. I didn’t blame him for leaving me. I mean, after all, I couldn’t stand me either.”

Much of my work with Jill was to help her understand the disease process in which she had been immersed for so long, her addiction to doomed relationships with emotionally unavailable men. The addictive aspect of Jill’s behavior in her relationships parallels the addictive use of a drug. Early in each of her relationships there was an initial “high,” a feeling of euphoria and excitement while she believed that finally her deepest needs for love, attention, and emotional security might be met. Believing this, Jill became more and more dependent on the man and the relationship in order to feel good. Then, like an addict who must use a drug more as it produces less effect, she was driven to pursue the relationship harder as it gave her less satisfaction and fulfillment. Trying to sustain what had once felt so wonderful, so promising, Jill slavishly dogged her man, needing more contact, more reassurance, more love as she received less and less. The worse the situation became, the harder it was to let go because of the depth of her need. She could not quit.

Jill was twenty-nine years old when she first came to see me. Her father had been dead seven years, but he was still the most important man in her life. In a way he was the only

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man in her life, because in every relationship with another male to whom she was attracted, she was really relating to her father, still trying so very hard to win love from this man who could not, because of his own problems, give it.

When our childhood experiences are particularly painful, we are often unconsciously compelled to recreate similar situations throughout our lives, in a drive to gain mastery over them.

For instance, if we, like Jill, loved and needed a parent who did not respond to us, we often become involved with a similar person, or a series of them, in adulthood in an attempt to “win” the old struggle to be loved. Jill personified this dynamic as she found herself drawn to one unsuitable man after another.

There is an old joke about a nearsighted man who has lost his keys late at night and is looking for them by the light of a street lamp. Another person comes along and offers to help him look but asks him, “Are you sure this is where you lost them?” He answers, “No, but this is where the light is.”

Jill, like the man in the story, was searching for what was missing in her life, not where there was some hope of finding it, but where, because she was a woman who loved too much, it was easiest for her to look.

Throughout this book we will explore what loving too much is, why we do it, where we learned it, and how to change our style of loving into a healthier way of relating. Let’s look again at the characteristics of women who love too much, one by one this time.

1. Typically, you come from a dysfunctional home in which your emotional needs were not met.

Perhaps the best way to approach understanding this characteristic is to begin with the second half of it first: “. . . in which your emotional needs were not met.” “Emotional

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needs” does not refer only to your needs for love and affection. Although that aspect is important, even more critical is the fact that your perceptions and feelings were largely ignored or denied rather than accepted and validated. An example: Parents are fighting. Child feels afraid. Child asks mother, “Why are you mad at Daddy?” Mother answers, “I’m not mad,” while looking angry and troubled. Child now feels confused, more afraid, and says, “I heard you shouting.” Mother replies angrily, “I told you I’m not mad but I’m going to be if you keep this up!” Child now feels fear, confusion, anger, and guilt. Her parent has implied that her perceptions are incorrect, but if that is true, where are these feelings of fear coming from? The child must now choose between knowing that she is right and that her parent has deliberately lied to her, or thinking that she is wrong in what she hears, sees, and feels. She will often settle for confusion, tuning out her perceptions so that she does not have to experience the discomfort of having them invalidated. This impairs a child’s ability to trust herself and her perceptions, both in childhood and later in adulthood, especially in close relationships.

Needs for affection may also be denied or insufficiently met. When parents are fighting with each other, or caught up in other kinds of struggles, there may be little time or attention left for the children in the family. This leaves a child hungry for love while not knowing how to trust it or accept it and feeling undeserving of it.

Now for the first part of this characteristic: coming from a dysfunctional home. Dysfunctional homes are those in which one or more of the following occur:

= abuse of alcohol and/or other drugs (prescribed or illicit)

= compulsive behavior such as compulsive eating, working, cleaning, gambling, spending, dieting, exercising,

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and so on; these practices are addictive behaviors, as well as progressive disease processes; among their many other harmful effects, they effectively disrupt and prevent honest contact and intimacy in a family.

- = battering of spouse and/or children
- = inappropriate sexual behavior on the part of a parent toward a child, ranging from seductiveness to incest
- = constant arguing and tension
- = extended periods of time in which parents refuse to speak to each other
- = parents who have conflicting attitudes or values or display contradictory behaviors that compete for their children's allegiance
- = parents who are competitive with each other or with their children
- = a parent who cannot relate to others in the family and thus actively avoids them, while blaming them for this avoidance
- = extreme rigidity about money, religion, work, use of time, displays of affection, sex, television, housework, sports, politics, and so on; obsession with any of these can preclude contact and intimacy, because the emphasis is not on relating, but on following the rules.

If one parent displays any of these kinds of behaviors or obsessions, it is damaging to a child. If both parents are caught up in any of these unhealthy practices, the results may be even more detrimental. Often parents practice complementary kinds of pathology. For instance, an alcoholic and a compulsive eater frequently will marry, and then each will struggle to control the other's addiction. Parents

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also often balance each other in unhealthy ways; when the smothering, overprotective mother is married to the angry and rejecting father each parent is actually enabled by the other's behavior and attitudes to continue relating to the children in a destructive way.

Dysfunctional families come in many styles and varieties, but they all share one effect they have on children growing up in them: these children are to some extent damaged in their ability to feel and relate.

2. Having received little real nurturing yourself, you try to fill this unmet need vicariously by becoming a caregiver, especially to men who appear in some way needy.

Think about how children, especially little girls, behave when they are lacking the love and attention they want and need. While a little boy may become angry and act out with destructive behavior and fighting, more often a little girl will turn her attention to a favorite doll. Rocking and soothing it, and at some level identifying with it, that little girl is engaged in a roundabout effort to receive the nurturing she needs. As adults, women who love too much do the same thing, perhaps only slightly more subtly. In general, we become care-givers in most if not all, areas of our lives. Women from dysfunctional homes (and especially, I have observed, from alcoholic homes) are overrepresented in the helping professions, working as nurses, counselors, therapists, and social workers. We are drawn to those who are needy, compassionately identifying with their pain and seeking to relieve it in order to ameliorate our own. That the men who attract us most strongly are those who appear to be needy makes sense if we understand that it is our own wish to be loved and helped that is at the root of the attraction.

A man who appeals to us need not necessarily be penniless or in ill health. Perhaps he is unable to relate well to

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others, or is cold and unaffectionate, or stubborn or selfish, or sulking or melancholy. Maybe he is a bit wild and irresponsible, or unable to make a commitment or be faithful. Or maybe he tells us he has never been able to love anyone. Depending on our own background, we will respond to different varieties of neediness. But respond we will, with the conviction that this man needs our help, our compassion, and our wisdom in order to improve his life.

3. Because you were never able to change your parent(s) into the warm, loving caretaker(s) you longed for, you respond deeply to the familiar type of emotionally unavailable man whom you can again try to change through your love.

Perhaps your struggle was with one parent, perhaps with both. But whatever was wrong or missing or painful in the past is what you are trying to make turn out right in the present.

Now it begins to be apparent that something very unwholesome and self-defeating is going on. It would be fine if we brought all our sympathy, compassion, and understanding into relationships with healthy men, men with whom there was some hope of getting our own needs met. But we are not attracted to healthy men who could give us what we need. They seem boring to us. We are attracted to men who replicate for us the struggle we endured with our parents, when we tried to be good enough, loving enough, worthy enough, helpful enough, and smart enough to win the love, attention, and approval from those who could not give us what we needed, because of their own problems and preoccupations. Now we operate as though love, attention, and approval don't count unless we are able to extract them from a man who is also unable to readily give them to us, because of his own problems and preoccupations.

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4. Terrified of abandonment, you will do anything to keep a relationship from dissolving.

Abandonment is a very strong word. It implies being left, possibly to die, because we may not be able to survive alone. There is literal abandonment, and there is emotional abandonment. Every woman who loves too much has at least experienced profound emotional abandonment, with all the terror and emptiness that implies. As an adult, being left by a man who represents in so many ways those people who first abandoned us brings up all the terror again. Of course, we would do anything to avoid feeling that way again. Which leads into the next characteristic.

5. Almost nothing is too much trouble, takes too much time, or is too expensive if it will “help” the man you are involved with.

The theory behind all this helping is that if it works, the man will become everything you want and need him to be, which means that you will win that struggle to gain what you’ve wanted so much for so long.

So, while we are often frugal and even self-denying on our own behalf, we will go to any lengths to help him. Some of our efforts on his behalf include

- = buying him clothes to improve his self-image
- = finding a therapist for him and begging him to go
- = financing expensive hobbies to help him use his time better
- = going through disruptive geographic relocations because “he’s not happy here”
- = giving him half or all of our property and possessions so he won’t feel inferior to us

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