**Rejection and Heartbreak** by Helen Fisher

"Parting is all we need to know of hell.” Emily Dickinson got it right. Almost no one in the world escapes the feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, fear and fury that rejection can create. Among college students at Case Western Reserve, 93% of both men and women reported that they had been dumped by someone they passionately loved; 93% also said they had rejected someone who was deeply in love them. And these men and women were still young—with decades of love, and possible disasters, ahead of them. Ain’t love grand? You bet…when your passion is returned and things are going well. But when love is unrequited, it’s a whole other story.

To understand what is going on in the brain when you have been rejected in love, Lucy, Helen and others put 15 men and women who had just been rejected into the brain scanner. Their average age was twenty; they had been passionately in love a mean of 21 months, and they had been rejected an average of 63 days prior to their scanning date. And as Helen established in her interview with each participant before the experiment, none were entirely in control of their emotions or actions. Most were still calling their rejecter in the middle of the night, showing up unexpectedly to seduce or plead, or frantically sending emails--all in hopes of renewing the relationship. A few, on the other hand, had entirely given up--and slipped into profound despair.

**Stages of Rejection**

Psychiatrists have suggested that there are two general phases of rejection: Protest and Resignation.

During the Protest Phase, men and women dedicate themselves to winning their partner back. Restless energy, insomnia, loss of appetite (or binge eating), and obsessive thoughts about the beloved plague them. Many sob; others drink too much, drive too fast, hole up and watch TV, or talk to friends and family incessantly about the evaporating partnership. Intense longing, hope, regret, nostalgic reminiscing: they swing from one powerful emotion to the next. Many suffer outbursts of fury too, known as “abandonment rage.” And zealously they search for clues of what went wrong and how to reconcile with their wayward mate.

The sexes often have different strategies for reunion, however. Women try to seduce. And they seek to “talk things out” with the beloved, searching to understand the situation. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to challenge a rival, shower their lost love with presents and affection, or just attempt to look more important--buying a new car, wearing more expensive clothes, or regaling the errant lover with tales of their grand adventures. And both sexes try to make their wandering partner jealous by showing up with others.

Alas, when they finally realize that their lover is gone forever, rejected people slump into hopelessness and despair--the Resignation Phase. As the 8th Century poet, Li Po, said of this, “I am exhausted by longing.” Many become so lethargic that they look as if they are carrying an 800 pound gorilla on their back. And they suffer from what academics call anhedonia, unable to find pleasure in anything at all. Some even die of a stroke or heart attack caused by stress

**Why Do We Suffer So?**

Around the world, some disappointed lovers slip into clinical depression; others stalk, murder or kill themselves. As the Swiss writer Henri Frederic Amiel put it, "The more a man loves, the more he suffers." The Tamil peoples of South India call this state of romantic suffering "mayakkam," meaning intoxication, dizziness and delusion. And Poet John Keats wrote of his dependency on a beloved, “Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath, / And so live ever-–or else swoon to death.”

Why do rejected men and women suffer so? Nature appears to have overdone it. But rejected men and women have lost priceless social ties, precious economic resources, comforting daily rituals and vital self-esteem. Even more essential, many have lost an opportunity to have children—a form of genetic extinction.

No wonder we try so hard to win back a vanishing mate. No wonder we feel such despair when a lover leaves for good. Our social, economic and genetic future are at stake.

**Addicted to Your Romantic Partner**

The brain studies confirm that love can be described as an addiction. It is a natural addiction. Maybe drugs like cocaine just hop on the natural addiction systems needed for hunger, thirst, romance and attachment.

Indeed, the passion we feel after rejection shows all of the traits of an addiction.

Foremost, like all addicts, recently rejected lovers display intense energy and motivation to get their drug: the beloved. They focus their attention and think obsessively about him or her--intrusive thinking. When we asked our rejected participants what percentage of the day and evening they thought about their departing partner, most replied that they thought about him or her some 85% of their waking hours; others said they never stop thinking about their rejecting mate. Someone was camping in their head.

The besotted man or woman also craves emotional union with their sweetheart. Sure, they’d love to have sex with him or her. But foremost, they hope their disappearing lover will call, write, invite them out, rescind their decision to depart and say those precious words, “I love you.” Like any addict, abandoned lovers hunger for their drug—their mate.

Rejected lovers also express personality changes, as do other kinds of addicts. Some change their hair or clothes to look sexier or more romantically appealing; some adopt new interests to attract or appease; some even change their careers or move to a different state or country to follow him or her.

And as the cocaine addict becomes highly anxious without their drug, the lover suffers “separation anxiety” when out of touch. Even worse, when rejected they often love even harder--frustration-attraction. Alas, barriers increase romantic passion. Terrence, the poet of ancient Rome expressed this aptly, saying “The less my hope, the hotter my love.”

Rejected lovers distort reality, too. Most can list all the things that went wrong in the relationship. But they sweep these truths aside--believing they can overcome almost any obstacle to win back their lover and make their dreams come true.

Like the cocaine addict who will do just about anything to get their drug, lovers are emotionally and physically dependent. Most are willing to do dangerous or inappropriate things to regain their mate. They lose their self-control, a central trait of any addiction.

Last, rejected lovers show all three of the central characteristics of any addiction: Tolerance; Withdrawal; and Relapse. Like the addict who needs more and more of their “drug of choice,” the lover must see the beloved endlessly. When rejected, they plummet into excruciating mental and physical pain as well, withdrawal. And long after the relationship is over, even the slightest reminder, such as a song on the car radio or any other external cue, can re-trigger their intense craving for him or her.

Most revealing, all of the primary addictions engage the brain’s Reward System. So does romantic love.

So how can we deal with this addiction to another person?

**Recovering From Rejection**

Throw out the cards and letters. Delete the emails and texts. Put all the mementos of the relationship in a box and bury the container in a closet if you can’t throw it out. Alcoholics who give up drinking don’t leave a bottle of vodka on their desk. Remove the photos. Remove everything that will trigger memories of your lost love and likely send you spinning into a relapse of excruciating anguish.

Don’t call; don’t write; don’t show up where you lover works, exercises and hangs out. If you see his or her friends, don’t ask how your departing sweetheart fares. Cold turkey: it’s the only way to heal the addicted brain.

Create an aphorism. Develop a short mantra that you can repeat to yourself while in the shower, while driving in your car, or any place or any time you feel invaded by thoughts of him or her. The first half of the slogan should boost your self-esteem; the second half should state what you really want in the future. A good aphorism might be: “I love being myself with a soul mate of my own.” Moreover, picture yourself walking with someone new. And when you find yourself falling into memories of your sweetheart, dwell on the negative events, not the positive ones.

Stay busy. Avoid what psychologists call the “vegetative state”--staring into space. Get up. Get dressed. Go out. As the Bible says, “Take up your bed and walk.” Do it.

And go do novel things, interesting things, exciting things, adventurous things. Any kind of novelty boosts the dopamine system in the brain—giving you renewed energy and optimism.

Exercise is essential too. Any kind of aerobic exercise also stimulates the dopamine system. Working out also elevates serotonin to calm you, the endorphins to lessen pain, and Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) to boost your memory and alertness.

Sunlight is good for healing. It stimulates the pineal gland, regulating body rhythms and elevating mood.

Avoid sweets, they bring you down.

And take tylenol! In one experiment, scientists put 40 recently rejected men and women into the brain scanner (fMRI) and compared their brain activity as they looked at their beloved with that as they felt a pain on their forearm equivalent to a very hot cup of coffee. Both activated pain centers. And in another study, researchers found that Tylenol alleviated the physical pain of rejection.

Count your blessings. We all have things to be truly grateful for. List them. Memorize them. Focus on what is going right in your life, in your family’s life, in the world today. Negative thoughts strain the mind and may slow the healing process.

And smile. Smiling moves facial muscles, which then affect the nerves to make you feel better.

Remember that Time heals. We have proven this. Our scanning participants who had increased time between the final rejection and the brain scanning experiment showed less activity in the ventral pallidum, the brain region linked with feelings of attachment. With time, attachment wanes.

And never give up. Take in a meeting of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous if recovery is going too slowly or you need to meet others in your state of anguish. Or find a good therapist or drug counselor to help alleviate the pain. But we can say with some authority that some joyous morning you will wake up to realize that you haven’t thought about him or her all week. You will feel new life in your limbs, a new skip in your step, a new glisten in your eye--and you will realize that you are free.

The Human brain is remarkably resilient. No matter how painful heartbreak is, we are almost always able to love again.

<https://theanatomyoflove.com/the-results/heartbreak-results/heartbreak/>