The love addict: neurotic and borderline-like traits

In the older psychodynamic sense, the love addict can be understood as neurotic because the person is distressed by an unresolved conflict between a profound need for attachment and an expectation of rejection or abandonment. The conflict is managed through obsession, fantasy, rationalization, compulsive pursuit, and attempts to secure love from another person. Rather than trusting their own value, the love addict makes the partner the source of identity, reassurance, emotional regulation, and sometimes survival.

This is “neurotic” in the classical sense because the person retains some reality testing but repeatedly distorts reality to protect the attachment. They may recognize that a partner is unavailable, abusive, or inconsistent, yet preserve the fantasy that the partner is secretly loving or will eventually change. The central defence is often idealization: the partner is elevated into a uniquely powerful, rescuing, or “soul-mate” figure, while the addict minimizes contradictory evidence. Pia Mellody’s model emphasizes excessive time, attention, and value directed toward the other person, accompanied by inadequate self-care and unrealistic expectations that the relationship will provide unconditional love.

The love addict can also display traits that resemble borderline personality organization:

- intense fear of abandonment;
- unstable and rapidly changing representations of the partner;
- idealization followed by disappointment, rage, or devaluation;
- emotional dependence on the relationship;
- difficulty tolerating aloneness;
- identity diffusion or uncertainty about who one is outside the relationship;
- frantic efforts to restore closeness after perceived rejection;
- impulsive or self-destructive behaviour during separation.

These parallels are especially clear because borderline pathology is characterized by unstable relationships, fear of abandonment, unstable self-image, chronic emptiness, intense affect, and impulsive behaviour. National Institutes of Health1 However, resemblance is not equivalence. A person may show borderline-like relational traits without meeting criteria for borderline personality disorder, which requires a pervasive and enduring pattern across contexts, not merely an intense love relationship.

From this perspective, the love addict’s question is not simply, “Does this person love me?” It is closer to: “Can I continue to exist as a worthwhile person if this person does not love me?” The partner becomes an external regulator of self-esteem. Separation therefore feels not merely painful but catastrophic.

The love avoidant: narcissistic defences

The love avoidant can be interpreted as using narcissistic defences, particularly defences of superiority, self-sufficiency, control, and emotional distance. This does not necessarily mean that the avoidant has narcissistic personality disorder. Rather, narcissistic functioning here means that vulnerability is warded off by constructing a self-image of independence: “I do not need anyone,” “Other people are needy,” or “I am the one who must remain in control.”

Mellody’s avoidant is not simply uninterested in intimacy. The avoidant often wants the benefits of attachment—admiration, sexual intensity, companionship, caretaking, or validation—without surrendering autonomy or exposing emotional need. The person may use seduction or romantic intensity to draw the partner close, then retreat once genuine mutuality is expected. Intimacy is experienced as obligation, engulfment, loss of control, or emotional labor. rioretreatcenter.com1

This creates several narcissistic-looking traits:

- an exaggerated investment in autonomy and control;
- difficulty recognizing the partner’s subjectivity and emotional needs;
- entitlement to receive care while resisting reciprocal vulnerability;
- use of distance, withholding, anger, or withdrawal to regulate the partner;
- devaluation of the partner as “too needy” after initially idealizing or seducing them;
- reliance on admiration, sexual attention, work, status, or other external sources of self-esteem;
- a tendency to experience ordinary relational demands as burdensome intrusions.

The avoidant may therefore resemble the narcissistic person who needs others for self-esteem but cannot tolerate dependence on them. The apparent self-sufficiency is defensive rather than genuine. Underneath the superiority may be shame, inadequacy, helplessness, or fear that emotional dependence will expose an unprotected self. Narcissistic personality disorder itself involves grandiosity, need for admiration, entitlement, exploitation, impaired empathy, and sensitivity around self-esteem; the avoidant pattern may contain some of these traits without constituting the disorder.

The shared fear of annihilation

The deepest link between the two positions is that both fear annihilation—the loss of psychological cohesion, identity, agency, or emotional survivability. In psychoanalytic language, annihilation anxiety is a primitive fear of being overwhelmed, disintegrated, or losing one's sense of self. Winnicott described related "primitive agonies" and the fear of returning to an unintegrated state when early environmental support failed.

The two partners defend against this fear in opposite directions:

Relational position	Threat that feels annihilating	Defensive solution
Love addict	"If you leave, I disappear; I have no self or value without you."	Pursue, idealize, merge, cling, appease, and make the partner indispensable
Love avoidant	"If I let you close, I will be swallowed, controlled, obligated, or exposed."	Distance, control, withhold, devalue, stay busy, and preserve emotional sovereignty

For the love addict, annihilation is experienced as abandonment and psychic emptiness. The person tries to prevent it through fusion. The partner is made into a psychological life-support system. The addict may tolerate mistreatment because even painful attachment feels safer than the terror of being alone.

For the love avoidant, annihilation is experienced as engulfment and loss of separateness. The person tries to prevent it through rigid boundaries, emotional withdrawal, superiority, or control. The avoidant may prefer relationships in which the partner remains desiring and available but never gains enough emotional access to threaten the avoidant's defensive structure.

Thus, pursuit and withdrawal are not opposites at the deepest level. They are parallel attempts to regulate the same primitive terror. The love addict says, in effect, "Do not leave me, or I will cease to exist." The love avoidant says, "Do not get too close, or I will cease to exist."

The “co-addicted tango”

This explains why the two positions are often attracted to one another. The love addict’s pursuit confirms the avoidant’s sense of power, desirability, and importance. The avoidant’s distance intensifies the addict’s longing and confirms the addict’s expectation that love must be earned. Each person’s defence activates the other’s wound:

1. The avoidant offers seduction or intermittent intimacy.
2. The addict idealizes the avoidant and intensifies pursuit.
3. The avoidant experiences the pursuit as pressure or engulfment.
4. The avoidant withdraws, withholds, becomes angry, or seeks intensity elsewhere.
5. The addict experiences abandonment panic and pursues more intensely.
6. The avoidant regains distance and control, while both become resentful and ashamed.

The addict’s borderline-like strategies—idealization, frantic pursuit, emotional escalation—provoke the avoidant’s narcissistic defences of superiority, withdrawal, and devaluation. In turn, the avoidant’s withdrawal intensifies the addict’s abandonment terror. What appears to be a conflict between a “needy” person and a “cold” person is therefore a mutually reinforcing defensive system.

The most precise conclusion is not that every love addict has borderline personality disorder or that every love avoidant is narcissistic. It is that Mellody’s model can be read psychodynamically: the love addict organizes the self around preventing abandonment, while the love avoidant organizes the self around preventing engulfment. Both are defending against the same underlying terror—that without a safe, separate, and internally stable self, intimacy will result either in psychic disappearance through abandonment or psychic disappearance through fusion.