

Family Shelter Service

605 EAST ROOSEVELT ROAD • WHEATON, ILLINOIS 60187 • HOTLINE: (630) 469-5650

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT **A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE "WOMEN WHO LOVE TOO MUCH" MOVEMENT**

By Linda S. Brown, Ph.D., ABPP

Reprinted with permission from *Working Together*, newsletter of the Center for Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Women are forever attempting to improve themselves. There is something almost insidious about our willingness to see what's wrong and strive to fix it; it's as if we're affirming continually the notion that we are incomplete, wrong, bad, inadequate, only the rib and not the whole human. Women make up the vast majority of those in therapy; we buy the makeup, the plastic surgery, we strive to be different, better. And we take responsibility for all the problems in our interpersonal relationships; as early as 1956, the feminist sociologist of marriage, Jessie Benard, pointed out that in the average marriage, both partners ascribed responsibility for the happiness or failure of the relationship to the woman.

Every few years, a new spate of books comes forth, purporting to pinpoint at last what's really wrong with women. The message given by each of these books and experts is that if women would just heed their advice and adjust themselves accordingly, all would be well. We would be loved, successful, good mothers, have it all. So in the past 20 years we've had assertiveness training, the Total Woman, the Cinderella Complex, smart women making foolish choices or acting like superwoman when we were merely mortal. In 1986, we've got *Loving Too Much*.

I first encountered the book *Women Who Love Too Much* when my clients started to preface their sessions with "I've just read this book..." This is common for me; as a feminist therapist, I believe that I can learn from my clients and they, knowing that, oblige by sharing their discoveries with me. After four or five clients bring up the same

book, I usually go out and get it, assuming that they know something that I don't, and that it behooves me to listen to the voice of their experiences.

So I bought and read the book. I noticed on the first reading that I was uncomfortable with something about it; I wasn't sure what. So I read it again, and thought about what the author, in caring and sincerity was saying, and asked myself as a feminist what the implications were for women. I began to locate the source of my disquiet as I had previously with the other books of the "How To Be Truly Perfect Although Female" genre.

First, let's look at the word "love." Dangerous word, that; we wish for it, give it to others, but rarely have some for ourselves. The woman Robin Norwood describes in her book seem to be anything but loving of either themselves or others. For themselves, there is self-hatred, a sense of inadequacy, the helplessness learned through the experience of victimization, the "love" that they have for their partners seems to bear no resemblance to love as I know it; obsession, perhaps, but not love.

There is also the missing piece of the sentence, as in *Women Who Love Whom? Too Much*. The relationships that Norwood describes include more than the woman who is the focus of the book; there is almost always a man out there somewhere, exploiting his partner, taking her time, attention, money and sexuality. But where is the book "Men Who Love Too Little?" Where are the burgeoning support and therapy groups for men who are willing to exploit and

use, who put off intimacy? As with the psychiatrists of two decades ago, who wrote of the "Wife-Beater's Wife" because they could not get the abusers to sit down and be studied, it is far simpler to preach to victims; they have already been taught that they are the cause of the problem anyway.

Finally, there is the addiction model. I have no problems with the concept of addiction properly applied; I can and do endorse recovery in Twelve-Step Program settings for women with addictions to drug and alcohol. However, there is a risk inherent in framing the phenomenon being described by Norwood as an addiction. The risk is that the woman is labeled as "sick," "addicted to pain" (to use Norwood's own terminology); the pathology is placed within the individual woman, the responsibility for making everything different is once again laid in her lap.

Norwood is describing a problem that does exist; the resonance of this book in the lives of many women cannot be denied. But as with any problem, how you call it may depend upon how you see it. As a feminist therapist, the place from which I look leads me to very different conclusions than the ones that Norwood is drawing.

Women, particularly the 90% of women who are heterosexual, are indeed faced with a difficult task in relationship building. Women and men both are socialized in cultures that devalue women and over value men. Even in an intimate relationship where a man is not exploitative or abusive (and I believe that most men are neither), this tips the balance of power in a dangerous way. Add to that other

social factors: the likelihood that if both work outside the home, he takes home a bigger paycheck; the likelihood that no matter who earns what, she will be responsible not only for her job performance, but the cleanliness and comfort of home and children. Even in a caring marriage, a man is likely to have more power. Women have been taught that they are nothing without a man; doing anything to get and keep one is socially sanctioned and modeled constantly.

Thus, I would place the source of the problem that Norwood is describing in cultural sexism, not in defective women who love too much. Norwood herself falls prey to unconscious sexist thinking. In her case studies of women in the book, all of the women are described by their age, their marital status and by their looks; and most of these women are killingly cute, girlish, and childlike, with "sausage curls" (an attorney) and other symbols of little girlhood. The men are described by their age and their occupation. Bernard's 30-year-old comment that women get the blame for whatever happens in relationships also has its echo here. The men are portrayed as basically nice guys lured down the path of being loved too much by women who are really sick and in need of going into recovery.

Adjunct to sexism as the problem is its right arm, violence against women. Andrea Dworkin has commented cogently that one of the promises of the ...Right to women is that if we behave correctly, we will be protected against violence, abuse, and exploitation at the hands of men. Almost all of the women Norwood describes are being abused; they are trapped in the cycle of violence, be it physical, emotional, verbal or sexual. What Norwood labels as the pathological "need to control" of the woman who loves too much is most likely the survival strategy of the abused woman attempting to ameliorate the load that is falling, literally and figuratively, on her head. But Norwood's perspective compounds the violence by placing the problem

in the woman. The fact that these women are trying hard to be good, and so saved from the abuse, seems to escape her.

Why, if this book is so woman blaming, does it strike such a responsive chord in women? It is my sense that such blame speaks to old and powerful messages within each of us regarding women's badness and lack of worth. Contrast for a minute the extreme popularity of this and other woman blaming works with books published contemporaneously that address the same phenomena from a non-woman-blaming perspective. Where are the Men Are Just Desserts support groups, the Why Do I Think I Am Nothing Without A Man meetings? Neither Sonia Friedman nor Penelope Russianoff (the respective authors of the two titles referred to) are describing anything different from what Norwood does. But they refuse to blame women; they take a more feminist analysis, they seek the sources of the problem in the environment as well as in the woman. This apparently does not strike deeply enough into internalized sexism to have the gut ring of truth that women-blaming books do.

So what's a feminist therapist to do? First, I believe that it is essential that women's experience of abusive and exploitative relationships with men be validated. We must speak the truth to women about the sources of those problems, and challenge women about the sources of those problems, and challenge women to see how much easier it is to blame ourselves; how much more frightening to make men equally responsible, and to place the problem in the fundamental institutions of sexist culture. Because it is more frightening to say that the problem will not be solved by going to WWWLTM meetings, that the answer is not in bettering ourselves; it is terrifying to realize that we may not be able to have what we want in life through no doing of our own, but because we have been seduced and abandoned by the messages of a

sexist and often women-hating society. This is not to say that women are helpless victims. Rather, it is to take the responsibility and begin to allocate it more fairly.

We must begin to draw the connections between "loving too much" and the social and emotional control exercised over women by the ever-present specter of violence against us. The fear of being alone is not merely the fear of being unloved; it is also the very real fear of being unsafe, and women have been well taught to look to men for protection. We must also continue challenging the concept that women alone are in that state because they are flawed. Few of our cultural institutions welcome the woman on her own without insinuating that she should be better or happier attached to another person. The T-shirts that read "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" need to be pulled out of the drawers and put to work bearing the tidings that when we love ourselves, we can never love "too much".

I am often guided in my life by Hebrew sayings that I learned as a child; the music of them, and their pithiness, honed over years of use, speaks to my gut. The line that seems to apply here comes from Hillel: "If I am not for myself, then who am I for?" Women have yet to be taught to be for themselves. We must first speak truth to sexism before we can begin calling women addicts when they follow sexist rules in their relationships.