



TOXIC LOVE

► Are dysfunctional celebrity relationships harming us?

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Crazy in love

Are dysfunctional celebrity relationships setting a dangerous example, asks the novelist Joanna Briscoe

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Can celebrity values be blamed for some of our bad habits? (Wenn/Splash/Xposure)

We prefer our poisons in measured doses, but they don't always come that way. As a nation partial to drink, debt and celebrity shenanigans, we are also increasingly drawn to relationships that can only be described as toxic. Can celebrity values be blamed for some of our bad habits? Nowadays there are worrying role models for

what we can expect from our love lives. If Cheryl Cole is in the throes of being tempted back by her spectacularly unfaithful ex and George Clooney breaks up with yet another girlfriend at the age of 50, what kind of message filters down to the rest of us?

Our relationship role models used to be our parents, their parents and our friends. The traditional qualities of stability, loyalty and intelligence were to some extent overlaid by a fantasy, often inspired by literature or film, that added glamour. But now the unreal worlds we inhabit — informed by cyber images and celebrity ideals — are increasingly affecting us. “Civilians” now have the teeth whitening, Brazilian blow-dries and breast enlargements of their celluloid and reality-television counterparts, and, increasingly, our minds are also being retuned. At some level, the multiple pile-up that is Ryan Giggs’s romantic life starts to become halfway normal.

Of course nobody notices it happening. It's just that now we fancy something a cut above. We'd rather be Kate, any of the Kates — Middleton, Moss or Hudson. We look to Jennifer Aniston for an excuse to plough through the men. Most recently branded a "home-wrecker" for allegedly going out with her new boyfriend, Justin Theroux, only a week after his long-term partner moved out, Jen's behaviour somehow seems okay because it's her. It's the same with Clooney. Gorgeous, charming and sexually magnetic, he occupies a special place in our affections that allows us to think of him as an eternal bachelor rather than serial commitment-phobe. Elizabeth Hurley, another commitment-phobe, has just divorced and taken up with the ultimate toxic lover, Shane Warne. But as we watch Hurley and the womanising Warne tweet their way through the relationship rollercoaster ride, their transoceanic antics seem the norm.

Why do celebrities so often act this way? Debatably, they're born with a streak of madness, while fame tends to make even the sanest lose their grip on reality. When two insecure, attention-seeking people get together, a high-octane combination of glamour and disaster often ensues. Those on the red carpet are fed a constant diet of excitement, deference and sexual attention. We watch and emulate from the sidelines, without remembering that the world we inhabit is significantly different.

Toxic love is a dangerous sort of love. It's exciting and insecure, but ultimately empty and harmful. We've all been there at some point in our lives — chasing after people who possess deadly charm and just enough enticing unattainability to keep us intrigued and challenged. We know in our hearts that the relationship is wrong, and make excuses for all the inconsistent, capricious and outrageous behaviour. The dangerous beloved is so often an avoidant type (see box, left), and the persistent admirer is frequently someone with a pattern of anxious attachment. It's when the destructive pattern carries on that it becomes worrying.

The soap bubble of narcissism and need offers no true commitment, but it can be so compelling and distracting that we waste decades pursuing it. In my new novel, a character spends most of her adult life sacrificing all to an addictive relationship, only realising much, much later just how damaging her exciting affair has been.

Toxic love is mostly about inequality in terms of love or interest, and the inability to commit. "I know I ought to change this," says a friend, Mel, now in her forties, "but I can't really see myself being attracted to a different kind of man. What hurts the most is that I'm sure I've lost the chance for babies. That bit, don't ask me about it."

Always perceived as the pretty one, she had affairs with some of the most sought-after boys at college. A career in law followed. "I always thought the men my friends settled down with were a bit dull," she says. "I wanted something more intense, special. But I seem to go for men who don't want me as much as I want them. They're always so romantic at first, assuring me that I'm the big love, then they're just not there when I really need them. I spend so much of my time alone, crying or fixating. I just expected better than the average — I thought I'd end up with George Clooney, or a hotshot American lawyer at the least. Love doesn't feel real if it's not all-encompassing. But the loneliness — and powerlessness — is just hell. My shrink thinks I'm a commitment-phobe. All I can say to that is, I fall for commitment-phobes."

In a way, toxic love is simply what our society perceives as romance: the dysfunctional cultural standard we're taught early in life. And the celebrity role models that represent this seem ever nearer at hand. Now we can all have Ashton Kutcher tweeting us his private photos as if we know him.

"One of the problems with the celebrity model is that we're titillated, we're curious, but we don't necessarily see the pain that they're actually going through — we just see the glamour of it," says the relationship psychotherapist Paula Hall. "A lot of us suffer from an emotional and psychological malaise, and that kind of dangerous, apparently exciting relationship can fill the gap. Instead we need to look at what's missing and focus on that."

"Love," as the writer Lisa Appignanesi says, "is one of our last socially sanctioned forms of madness." Perhaps the time has come to wise up?

Joanna Briscoe's novel You (Bloomsbury £11.99) is out July. See the book trailer and read an extract at www.joannabriscoe.com

Meet your match

Ever wondered why some of us are always attracted to the wrong type of man? I know I have. Against my better judgment I find myself drawn to those who have commitment issues and leave me dangling, because they're exciting and give me the drama I crave; the good guys, the ones who care and don't make me anxious, simply leave me cold. According to the authors of a new book, *Attached*, it's all about my attachment style.

Our attachment styles are formed as children and can stay with us as adults, leading to dysfunctional ways of behaving in romantic relationships. The most successful couplings are those where at least one partner is securely attached, because "secures" aren't afraid of commitment and are good at communication and compromise. Anxiously attached people crave intimacy and tend to be preoccupied with relationships, while "avoidants" value their independence and keep partners at arm's length.

I'm at the secure end of anxious — not madly clingy, but keen to have someone I can count on. "The trouble is, anxiously attached people have a habit of getting together with avoidants," says Amir Levine, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist at Columbia University in New York, and one of the authors of *Attached*. Avoidant people do want relationships, but they're not comfortable with too much intimacy, so they find lots of ways to maintain their distance: such as not saying "I love you", being vague about the future or walking a couple of steps ahead of their partner.

How then can people who are a bit anxious make better choices? The key is in taking your time and giving secure people a chance, even if they don't seem so interesting. "People who are anxious get attached quickly," Levine says. The trick is to maintain a bit of distance when you first start seeing someone while you make a judgment about whether they are right for you.

Even avoidants can change, and the best way is to get involved with someone secure. "With a secure person you've got a built-in relationship coach who can teach you how to communicate," Levine says.

"Let's say your partner is going to the airport to catch a flight. If you're anxious, you'll be unsettled by the separation and want to hear from them. If you're with someone secure, they know this and they'll text you from the plane before they take off, so you never really get a chance to be anxious." If your partner is avoidant, however, it's another matter. They're not calling, so you call them. They get fed up, so they hit ignore. You know they're hitting ignore, so by the time you finally get to talk to them you're really upset and you have a huge fight.

"That's one of the things we tell avoidant people," Levine says. "If you understand that your partner's wellbeing is your wellbeing and your responsibility, you'll save yourself a lot of trouble and you'll both be happier."

From now on I'm searching for Mr Secure.
Mairi Macleod

Attached by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller (Rodale £13) is out now

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