

Love is not Charity

Romantic love is not a charity. It exists for your benefit, not your partner's.

Let me repeat that: The purpose of romantic love is to serve your own needs, not those of the person you love.

You are not a therapist. You are not a provider. You are not a parent. You are consumer. You should choose a relationship solely because you believe it will give you good value for your investment. You can pay a reasonable price for the services received, but if the costs consistently exceed the benefits, or if you can clearly get better benefits elsewhere, then the relationship must end. Repeat: It must end! This may sound cold and selfish, but it's the only approach to love that's going to work in the long run.

Romantic love is not the same as parenthood, even if the attachment is similar. A parent is unconditionally responsible for their child. If your child is the Elephant Boy, hideous to the rest of the world, you don't love him any less. If your child is sick, you are going to care for him and try to get him the best medical attention. If your child behaves badly, you are going to be firm with him and do what you can to change the behavior, at least until he is an adult.

Responsible married people are tempted to apply this same standard of unconditional love to their spouse. After all, they said in their marriage vows, "For better or worse," and "In sickness and in health." If your partner gets arrested, you are going to stick by him. If your partner fails to do what he said he would, you give him another chance—and another and another. If he lapses into alcoholism, you try to get him into treatment. You know he had a deprived childhood, and you are willing to make accommodations for it. "I wouldn't abandon him if he got cancer," a distressed spouse may say, "so how can I leave him when he has a mental disorder?"

Unfortunately, this is a defective attitude that is bound to get you deeper into trouble. By attending unconditionally to your partner as though he were a child, you may be inadvertently "enabling" him and encouraging him to act like a child.

If your partner behaves badly, even once, there is really only one solution: withdrawal. If you aren't married, this isn't a big deal; you just go back to your natural independent position, living your own life and relying on your own resources. It may or may not be a permanent withdrawal, but your partner's psychological problems are simply not yours to solve.