

*From the internationally bestselling author of
Women Who Love Too Much*

Letters

from

WOMEN

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MUCH

ROBIN NORWOOD

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About the Book

In her worldwide bestseller, *Women Who Love Too Much*, Robin Norwood explored relationship addiction.

In *Letters from Women Who Love Too Much*, she responds to women who have begun the difficult, brave journey towards healing and gives the essential guidelines for recovery:

- By sharing the experiences of other women can we learn how to make healing our first priority.
- By understanding cross-addictions - overlapping compulsive behaviour such as alcoholism, eating disorders, sexual addiction and trapping ourselves in debt - can we begin our own recovery.
- By sharing the example of successful recovery can we discover how to cure addictive loving.

With compassion, warmth and challenging insights, Robin Norwood offers us more than hope - she offers positive, concrete help.

About the Author

Robin Norwood is the author of the international bestsellers *Women Who Love Too Much* and *Why Me? Why This? Why Now?*. She was formerly in private practice as a licensed marriage, family and child therapist, specialising in chemical dependency and co-dependency. She lives in California.

Also by Robin Norwood

Women Who Love Too Much
Why Me? Why This? Why Now?
Daily Meditations for Women Who Love Too Much

Letters

from

WOMEN

WHO

LOVE

TOO

MUCH

ROBIN NORWOOD



arrow books

A mind might ponder its thoughts for ages
and not gain so much self-knowledge as the
passion of love shall teach it in a day.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson,*
“History”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK, LIKE *Women Who Love Too Much* (hereafter *WWL2M*), has been a birthing process, and two invaluable “midwives” assisted its emergence. First, my editor, Laura Golden Bellotti, whose skills so vitally shaped *WWL2M*, again brought her talent and discernment to bear on this project. With the recent birth of her own son and her consequent plunge into the consuming demands and delights of parenthood, she nevertheless has lost none of her editorial “Golden” touch, the ability to guide softly, firmly and reassuringly all at once. What a blessing it has been to work with her again.

And second, Victoria Raye Starr, whose being carries as much light as her name. As she converted these many letters and my handwritten comments on them to typewritten manuscript pages, she communicated her own richly personal and deeply honest understanding of much of the book’s material through innumerable notes attached to freshly typed pages. Often I’d be compelled to go back and rewrite in the light of her cogent comments and probing questions. Our countless conversations helped give me an invaluable perspective on the topics addressed in this book.

While I alone am responsible for its flaws and shortcomings, these two women have contributed immeasurably to whatever is worthwhile in this book, and they have my deepest thanks.

PREFACE

“SO, ARE YOU going to write *another* book?” It seemed that people began asking that question from the moment *Women Who Love Too Much* was completed, and my reaction was always the same. I felt like a new mother, tired and spent, lying in bed trying to recover from a long and difficult labor while cheerful bedside visitors repeatedly asked, “So, are you going to have *another* baby?” Somehow the very question seemed to vastly underrate the magnitude of the last effort, and I usually answered a little crossly, perhaps as that imagined new mother might have, “I don’t even want to think about it right now!” Privately, I was sure nothing would induce me to go through that painful birthing process again.

But the seeds from which this book would grow were sown with the first letter I received in response to *WWL2M*. Even before the official publication date, someone had found the book, read it and been moved enough to write. Her letter follows in its entirety:

Dear Ms. Norwood:

Never in my life have I been so moved by a book to put pen to paper to write to the author. Finding, discovering your book came unexpectedly as I was

searching for business texts to assist me in my burgeoning new life. I must say your work affected me so profoundly that I am certain it was the key in fostering an entire positive direction out of so many years of ceaseless pain and confusion. There were times I felt this book was written just for me alone. It was indeed powerful for me. I remember one night sitting on my kitchen floor poring over each page; at times I had to close it and put it by my side until my weeping lessened. God bless you for your clarity, sensitivity, eloquence, and most of all your decision to write it!

I was married to a very powerful man, and I had to leave for my own survival—although he loved me dearly in his way. I see now, through your gifted writing, so many dynamics I never understood.

Beth B.

As I read this letter, I cried. Giving birth to *WWL2M* had taken three years and much sacrifice, but now I knew it had all been worth it. There had been heated moments during the book's gestation when persons who knew the publishing business far better than I insisted that in order to sell, the book needed to be lighter, more positive, less depressing and with far less emphasis on addiction. But I was committed to describing what it had really been like for my clients, my friends and myself as we struggled with the men in our lives. My aim was to depict the frequency with which addiction and co-addiction appeared in so many of our stories and to clarify how very dangerous it was for us to continue our unhealthy patterns of living and relating to men. And I wanted to emphasize what a tremendous piece

of work we faced when we decided to change those patterns. Because I had attempted to describe truthfully the often very painful lives of women who love too much, my book did not turn out to be the light, easy-to-read self-help book some people expected; but it was the book I wanted to write.

After reading that first letter from Beth B., I knew *WWL2M* had been of value to at least one person. But there was also something specific in Beth's letter that touched me, aside from the fact that *WWL2M* was accomplishing its purpose. Just like Beth B., I had known so well that experience of sitting on the floor sobbing with pain and relief and gratitude because another woman had honestly described her struggle—a struggle so like my own. In my case, that experience had come after reading a magazine article in the early 1970s in which the author described how it felt to be a woman in this culture—to wake up and finally allow oneself to see and hear all the many ways that women as a class are insulted. When I read that author's words, I knew, with almost a shock, that I wasn't alone anymore. Her writing spoke so deeply and truly of my own need to be unaware and unawake in order to avoid feeling the pain, anger and humiliation that are a part of simply being female in a male-dominated society. But that choice to disregard so many of my experiences and reactions had been costly, and the author of that article spoke to my latent desire to awaken fully, to see and hear and feel everything I experienced, and to no longer silently participate in my own debasement. What was true for her was also

true for me, and through her example I was able to set free the feelings I had previously kept hidden even from myself. Her truth had helped me on my way to becoming bigger and braver and more grown up. Now, as I read Beth's letter more than a decade later I was vividly remembering that particular metamorphosis. *WWL2M* had touched another woman to the depth that I had once been touched, and she was now sharing that experience with me. A widening, deepening, brightening circle had been created between us.

That letter was the first of what before long began to feel like an avalanche of responses to the book. By phone (until, because of the sheer volume of calls, getting an unlisted number became an unavoidable necessity) and by letter, women, and some men, too, wanted to connect, to talk about what the book had meant to them. They wanted to pour out their personal experiences, and very often to say thanks. But many also wanted answers to specific questions or had problems they felt weren't addressed in the book.

These questions were important. Some I had heard over and over throughout my career in the field of addiction. Others were raised specifically in response to issues explored in *WWL2M* and came up repeatedly not only in letters but during the lectures and workshops I was giving. As the mail spread beyond my desk to nearly every flat surface in the house and the demand for responses from me weighed heavier, I began to search for a more efficient yet still personal way to answer them all.

Though time factors and the sheer volume of letters made it impossible, I longed to answer each of them in detail from my own personal perspective as a woman who has loved too much, indeed who has been a relationship addict most of my life, and also from my perspective as a therapist with many years' experience dealing with addiction and recovery.

But I also knew that the people sending those letters needed much more than a letter from me. They needed each other. These women and men who were sharing so much of themselves with me needed to hear each others' stories, to discover together how the disease of relationship addiction had operated in their lives. I wanted to be able to create for those who had never known it, or had not yet felt its power when applied to relationship addiction, that life-changing experience of hearing how it is for others who share the same problem.

As a therapist, and personally, through my own ongoing recovery, I am convinced of the tremendous value of peer support groups. These groups, made up of people dedicated to speaking honestly with one another about a common problem, and self-led according to simple guidelines and spiritual principles, are in my opinion the most powerful and profound sources of healing available. They provide the basis for recovery from every kind of addiction, chemical and behavioral. These kinds of groups are the hope of every addict for a new, better way of life.

Letters from Women Who Love Too Much is written, then, for two purposes. First, as a practical way of responding in detail to the many, many letters

that have common themes and questions. And second, to create an opportunity for those who share the problem of relationship addiction to hear from each other what that struggle has been like and, if there has been some recovery, how it has been achieved.

Obviously, in order to gain the most from this book a reader should have already read *WWL2M* slowly, carefully and hopefully more than once. I highly recommend rereading it before beginning this one. Until that book is *thoroughly* digested this one won't be of much help, as it is not intended to further explain the principles outlined in *WWL2M*. Rather its goal is to explore, through readers' questions and experiences, the implications of putting those principles into action.

When we are lonely and lost we don't yearn simply for company but for our own kind. I am convinced that the advice columns that are so popular are not read for the answers but for the questions. We want to know that we are not alone, that among all those other people whose lives are hidden from us, there are those who struggle as we do. I am grateful that in writing this second book I, too, am not alone. As has always been the case through the years of my own recovery, I have so many of you sharing your stories with me, helping me through the struggle and into the light. Now hopefully, through the vehicle of this book, you will be sharing with each other as well.

To you this book is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION

THE LETTERS IN this book really do exist, and each is quoted by permission of its author. Many of those whose letters are used herein have expressed gratitude for what they have received from reading *WWL2M*. These thanks, while gratefully acknowledged here, have been consistently edited out to avoid redundancy for the reader. Some further editing has been done for the sake of clarity and conciseness as well as to protect each author's identity.

The letters and responses have, of necessity, been sorted into chapters dealing with specific subjects. However, many of the letters contain multiple questions and problems. Since diseases of addiction, including relationship addiction, tend to overlap in real life, they do so in the letters as well. For instance, the topics of alcoholism and coalcoholism, sexual addiction, incest, compulsive eating and recovery may all be addressed in one letter. Thus any arbitrary sorting of these letters is just that—arbitrary. For this reason, do not expect the content of each letter to be either as narrow or as unequivocal as the chapter headings might suggest.

In answering each letter, I am drawing on fifteen years' experience in the field of addiction and nearly a lifetime of loving too much, thankfully including nearly seven years' recovery. But by no means does that imply that my answers are the "right" ones. They are simply that—*my* answers: incomplete, subjective and biased. I make no attempt to be all-inclusive in my responses. Rather, each letter is answered from the perspective of regarding addiction *as a disease* and each response or comment incorporates my very strong viewpoints on treatment, developed over years of making mistakes and learning from them. The reader may not like my response to any given letter, nor agree with it. That there are many other ways of responding, perhaps more helpful or insightful or to the point than the replies contained in this book, I readily acknowledge. We will each read these letters with our own eyes and our own hearts, like a series of Rorschach ink blots to which we bring our own perceptions, colored by our unique personal histories. The letters will absorb our experiences and reflect back our own projections so, of course, what each of us sees in them, feels from them, will vary. I believe that it is not the answers that matter so much anyway. What counts are the letters themselves, with their pain and pathos, lessons learned, slips backward, progress forward and sometimes even triumphs.

We all want answers to our questions, our fears and doubts and struggles. But the answers must eventually come, not from someone else's advice to

us, but from their example combined with our own commitment to changing our life. Setting ourselves upon a path trod by others who have faced the same problems and known the same fears and doubts and struggles, yet who are finding their way, helps us achieve our own recovery. As others share their stories, through their mistakes and victories they help us find our way, too.

Finally, I must state as strongly and clearly as possible that this book is not intended to be a general treatise on love, on how to find the right man or on how to make a relationship work. Quite the contrary, like *WWL2M*, this book is written primarily for heterosexual women who are *addicted* to relationships. Its purpose is to aid women whose lives have become progressively more unmanageable due to an increasingly debilitating obsession with either a particular man or with the latest of a series of men or, if in between involvements, with finding a man. By thus focusing this book I do not mean to imply that only heterosexual women become addicted to relationships, as this is absolutely not the case. Many men are also addictive in their relationships, just as addictive relating is very much a theme for great numbers of homosexual couples. I have chosen to focus on heterosexual women because their experience of relationship addiction is the one I understand best, both personally and professionally.

Although this book primarily contains letters from women who are obsessed with men, it also includes letters from homosexual men and women, straight

men, parents who are obsessed with their children and children who are obsessed with their parents. I hope *Letters from Women Who Love Too Much* will be of value to all these populations, as well as to those whose relationships, while troubled, are not addictive. It is, nevertheless, aimed at the woman whose mental and physical health are either at risk or have already begun to deteriorate, whose work performance is potentially or actually suffering, who is likely to be experiencing money problems, whose children, friends and other family members are neglected or abandoned as are her other interests, who is potentially or actively suicidal—who is, as the years go by, becoming sicker and sicker from her dependency on men and on what she chooses to call “love.”

As was stated in *WWL2M*, I regard relationship addiction as a definable, diagnosable and treatable *disease process*, akin to other diseases of addiction such as alcoholism and compulsive eating. It shares with these other diseases of addiction the fact that it is naturally progressive (it gets worse) without treatment but that it does respond to specific treatment that addresses its physical, emotional and spiritual components. It is my conviction that a treatment approach that neglects any one of these aspects will not, over time, prove effective.

All this needs to be said in order to explain the uncompromising approach to recovery that I believe is necessary. The most effective approach to addiction in terms of recovery is that taken by the Anonymous programs, and this approach is, in my

opinion, the best one for addressing relationship addiction as well. It is the *only* approach I personally can advocate.

ONE

LETTERS FROM WOMEN WHO ...

Dear Robin Norwood,

I hated your book.

I hated Women Who Love Too Much.

I hated this book so much that it took me months to read it.

Sometimes I could only read a page a day.

I hated the women that you wrote about. I hated the stories.

I hated what you said.

And then I finished the book.

And then:

—I went to my first Overeaters Anonymous meeting.

—I found Al-Anon.

—I joined ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics).

—I got into group therapy.

—I found VOICES^{fn1} and for the first time in my life talked about having been sexually abused.

—I stopped binge-eating.

—I got a new job.

—I made a budget for the first time (I'm thirty-three).

—I have begun a new life.

I was crazy and out of control. I am five foot three inches and I weighed ninety-nine pounds due to my bingeing and purging syndrome. Now I cannot imagine that there will be a day when I do not have WWL2M on my coffee table and a second copy in my "personal" drawer at the office.

I thank you.

Wendy D.

For me, Wendy's letter just about says it all. Simply reading a book, no matter how deeply it affects us, is never enough in itself to bring about the changes we desire in our lives. At best a book can be a signpost, an arrow pointing out the direction in which we need to travel. It is up to each of us to decide whether or not we will put our feet upon the path. But her letter brings to mind a very important point. When does *recovery* from any addiction actually begin?

Recovery begins when we channel the energy formerly spent on our disease into our recovery.

Recovery begins when we become willing, as Wendy did, to channel the energy and effort formerly spent on practicing our disease(s) into instead pursuing our recovery. Wendy's recovery requires a lot of time and work and dedication, but then being actively addictive cost her a great deal, too. So she made a choice to go to whatever lengths were necessary to get well—and she is continuing to make that choice each day. Thus, she has begun to recover, and her recovery will continue as long as she continues to make that choice.

Where do those of us who have yet to take the first step toward recovery from relationship addiction

begin? We begin by becoming *willing* to channel the energy and effort that we formerly spent on trying to bring about a change in someone else into instead changing ourselves. Our initial steps in this new direction may not come quickly or easily, and they may at first seem very small, but we must learn to respect their importance. As we move toward recovery, *no* step we take is really small, because each one changes the direction of our life.

The next letter is a good example of what a first step toward recovery might be. Taking just this small step and sticking with it already has implications for the rest of this woman's life. She has begun the process of change.

Dear Robin Norwood,

Valentine's Day has always been a tradition I've looked forward to with hope and yet dreaded at the same time, fearing the letdown of a day meant for love when none was received.

Two days ago I was thirty pages into WWL2M. In my desk drawer was a Valentine's card—sweet, suggestive—for a man who has basically not participated in our relationship for several weeks now. Not sending that card seems like such a little thing, yet it could be the first time I have actively chosen to stop giving to a man and a situation where the feeling of caring is not mutual.

I am not finished with the book yet. In fact, it is difficult for me to read because it speaks so clearly to why I have been in one failed relationship after another. This could be the tool that finally begins to liberate me, though.

I still have the card. I will not be sending it. Maybe Valentine's Day will become my Victory Day.

Theo P.

In Theo's case continuing recovery requires that she not only refrain from sending an amorous message to a man who isn't interested in her, but that she do something nice *for herself* to fill the void she has now created. We cannot simply stop an addictive behavior without substituting another (hopefully more positive) behavior to take its place. Otherwise the addictive behavior will only reassert itself. This is because Nature seems to abhor a vacuum as much in the areas of human behavior and emotions as in physics.

Since Theo has the power both to give and receive the gift she has been yearning for from someone else, she doesn't have to wait, empty, until a man comes along to fill her life with pleasure and love. She can become her own supply of love if she is willing to do so. The more lovingly and generously she treats herself the less likely she is to allow anyone else to treat her badly or indifferently.

All this is easy to see but not so easy to do, because nothing challenges us more than having to change the ways we think, feel and act, especially regarding *ourselves*. Theo admits that she hasn't yet been able to finish *WWL2M* because looking at her own patterns of relating is so uncomfortable for her. And yet recovery demands that we change, and the possibility of change begins with awareness. We must be willing to look honestly at our lives, which

requires courage; we must be willing to admit that we are not perfect, that we need help, and that we cannot do it alone, which requires humility. So *courage and humility* are absolutely essential in order for recovery to begin.

In the letter that follows, we'll look at what is necessary, after one has begun the process of recovery, for that process to continue.

Dear Robin Norwood,

My parents have a drinking problem, and though I don't drink or use drugs I now realize I have been addicted to men who are self-destructive. I have tried to control the three men I've lived with by threats, bribes, praise, lectures and every other manipulation I thought might work.

I now see that I am equally as self-destructive as they are because I seem to pick only those men who are needy and deficient. I can never stay interested in men who are healthy and competent.

My current boyfriend just called me from the Army brig where he is spending a forty-five-day sentence for possession of pot. He says he is learning a lesson and will stay out of trouble forever now. I told him I was happy to hear that and I hope he takes care of himself. I realize I can only take care of myself and am attending my first Al-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings in a couple of days.

I don't know if he and I will ever get back together and it doesn't really matter, because I'm learning how to be okay on my own.

Best wishes from a recovering man-addict.

Britt J.

As Britt detaches from her boyfriend's problem, focusing instead on her own unhealthy patterns of behavior and seeking help to change these, she exemplifies the first stage of recovery from relationship addiction. How diligently she continues to pursue her own recovery will determine whether she moves beyond this first stage. As you read the other letters from relationship addicts in this book you will learn that there is no specific amount of pain that guarantees a person will make a wholehearted commitment to recovery. For some individuals, incredible degrees of personal humiliation and degradation do not bring about the surrender that is required in order for recovery to begin. Instead, much like a gambler who cannot stop playing *because so much has already been lost*, these relationship addicts use their abasement to justify their ever more desperate attempts at controlling another person and salvaging a progressively deteriorating situation. In other words, as the consequences of relationship addiction worsen, some people continue to get sicker. But others "hit bottom" and become, at least temporarily, willing to go to whatever lengths are necessary to get well.

It is sometimes difficult to understand that a person can recognize the destructive power of addiction in his or her life and become willing to address it for a time, yet later lose that willingness completely. But this is the case more often than not. This is why distinctions must be made between three phases of recovery: beginning to recognize the disease process that is operating in one's life (this

could occur through reading a book such as *WWL2M*); becoming willing to address it as the life-threatening addiction it is (by going to a meeting of an Anonymous program that addresses the particular addiction); and continuing to make one's recovery one's first priority on a daily basis (through regular attendance at meetings and daily reading and prayer). As difficult as it is, launching into recovery is only a first step and is no guarantee that recovery will necessarily continue. Many, many more alcoholics initially become sober than are able to stay sober, and many, many more relationship addicts begin recovery than stay with it.

It is an inexplicable feature of every kind of addiction and every type of addict that no one, no matter how great that person's experience or expertise, can predict who will truly recover from a given addiction and who will not. All that can be safely predicted is that most addictive people will not get well. Yet those who continue daily to want recovery more than they want anything else and who make it their *first* priority will eventually, little by little and step by step, and often with the guidance and support of others who have been through the same struggle, achieve it.

In order to sustain recovery, in addition to the requisite willingness, courage and humility so necessary to begin the process, we must develop two more qualities: a capacity for *rigorous honesty and self-examination*, and a *reliance on a Power greater than ourselves*. This Higher Power certainly doesn't have to fit anyone else's definition of what it is or

should be. It can be called God. It can be without a name. It can as likely be found in a support group of peers as in a church or temple. It is a highly personal, individually formulated principle that, when called upon, provides an unfailing supply of strength and solace.

Cecilia's letter exemplifies how necessary this source of strength is as the life-changing process of recovery reshapes us.

Dear Robin,

I want to tell you about some of the things that have been happening for me since I read your book two years ago. From reading WWL2M I realized my family was alcoholic and that it is truly the whole family's disease. I went to a couple of Al-Anon meetings and began to understand myself and my choices much better. I felt "cured."

It was truly just the beginning.

Having had an unhappy early marriage and then a disastrous affair with a man who had a long and sordid criminal record, I was able, with what I had learned, to make a healthier choice for myself. Now I am married again, this time to a wonderful man who treats me like gold. Sometimes I get angry when he tells me he loves me. Sometimes I pick a fight. I am more comfortable being angry. I don't yet know how to be loved.

Something in my past has been buried for years and now, with the help of God, I have recently been allowed to remember it all. Five months ago when the memory came back I thought at first I'd die from the pain. I remembered that when I was four years old my Dad molested me. When I could finally