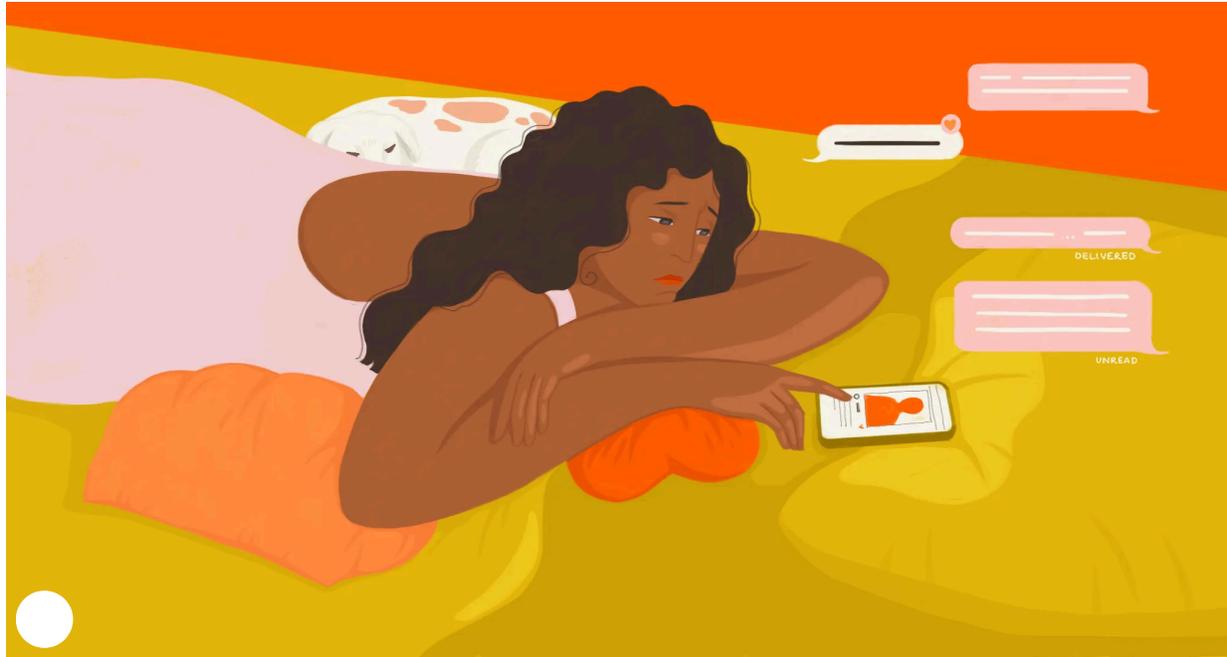


Limerence Is All Over TikTok, but Therapists Say You're Not Getting the Whole Story

HERE'S A BREAKDOWN OF LOVE VS. LIMERENCE



BY [SYDNEY MEISTER](#) • PUBLISHED MAR 18, 2024



DASHA BUROBINA FOR PUREWOW

This is a story that starts with you, in kindergarten, placing your mat next to the boy you like at nap time. When you get to sixth grade, you cross your fingers under your seat—hoping to see his name beside yours on the new seating chart. In tenth grade, you apply a fresh coat of mascara before hitting reply to his Snapchat. And after you graduate college, you send his [Hinge profile](#) into the group chat, asking: *Wasn't this kid a year older than us in Sigma Chi?*

Welcome to the evolution of the crush. My generation has come a long way from passing notes, and nowadays, we're more interested in seeing our beloved's name in an Instagram like. The [death of face-to-face interaction](#) has re-written the rules of relationships, so much so, that I couldn't begin to explain what [Rizz](#) or [Ghosting](#) meant to a time traveler from 1866. Nevertheless, for anyone who keeps up with the current dating zeitgeist, there's a term that's been blowing up on TikTok: limerence. In a video, [an influencer](#) explains, "Limerence is an unhealthy obsession or infatuation with someone without the facts...it's closely tied to [anxious attachment](#) and no one's talking about it." Challenge accepted.

After hours of research—and scrolling through numerous comments to see what the trend was about—I left with two takeaways. First, that the influencer was spot-on: Limerence is an involuntary obsession with a crush, often stemming from an [attachment style](#) developed in childhood. Yet, at the same time, I realized that TikTok has a very loose grasp on what limerence looks like in real-time. Countless videos romanticized the term with [Joe Goldberg edits](#) from Netflix's [You](#), almost purporting the idea that obsessive stalking is...trendy? Ugh.

In reality, however, I sat down with two award-winning therapists who said the same thing: Limerence is a rare, often debilitating disorder that's way more severe than sleuthing through his family vacation album from 2004 on Facebook. So below, find the answer to a [Hinge worthy question](#) everyone seems to be asking: **Is it love, or is it limerence?**

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MEET THE EXPERTS

- [Dr. Beatty Cohan](#) is a recognized psychotherapist and sex therapist with more 35 years of clinical experience. She graduated from McGill University with post-graduate specializations in marriage, family therapy and sexual dysfunction. She's appeared as an expert on talk shows and she currently hosts a live weekly radio show, [Ask Beatty](#).
- [Dr. Alison Cook](#) is a therapist, podcast host and the author of a brand new book, [I Shouldn't Feel This Way](#). She's certified in Internal Family Systems Therapy and studied at Dartmouth College (BA), Denver Seminary (MA) and the University of Denver (PhD). She specializes in integrating psychology and theology with an emphasis on couples therapy and healing relationships.

What Is Limerence?

Limerence is an [under-researched condition](#) coined by psychologist Dorothy Tennov in the late 1970s. It's used to describe individuals who display an obsessive attachment to a particular person or "limerent object" (LO) that interferes with daily functioning. The condition causes significant loss of productivity and emotional distress to sufferers—and it can interfere with the formation of healthy relationships if left untreated.

Limerence vs. Love

First, let's get one thing out of the way: It's normal to feel waves of emotion when you have a crush (I'd argue that's what makes it fun). The excitement of waiting for a text, the fear that they won't [reciprocate](#) and the gratification—or sometimes disappointment—of hearing back from them are all part of the process. In the case of limerence, however, these ups and downs are so intense that they breed an unrelenting preoccupation with what's going to happen next. Cook explains, "Someone experiencing limerence can't stop thinking about the other person, or limerent object (LO)—often to the point where it disrupts normal functioning at work or at home." She continues, "They might not be able to sleep, lose their appetite or feel dizzy, disoriented and lightheaded when they're around the other person. They could notice rapid changes in mood, bouncing from euphoria when feeling a connection to despair when feeling rejected."

In other words, this isn't just about frantically checking for a text or leaving your friend's birthday party to meet him at a bar. If you're limerent, your brain is basically hijacked by the object of your obsession. The LO becomes the sole orbit of your world, quite literally making it impossible to focus on anything else. "With a crush, you might daydream now and then," Cook says. "But generally speaking, those daydreams are soothing or emotionally comforting. You can snap out of them—they don't completely take over your

day.” To that end, many relationship coaches on TikTok have propagated the idea that limerence is mainly about obsessive thinking. And while, yes, there’s certainly research that links it to OCD, there’s a significant physical component that’s being overlooked with limerence. One study even compares it to substance use disorder (SUD); separation from an LO can result in withdrawal symptoms, like chest and abdomen pain. Add to that the fact that someone who’s limerent will spend extended periods of time trying to gain access to the LO. It almost mirrors the way a drug addict will pawn their grandma’s pearls for their next fix.

When I spoke to Cohan, she was also quick to note, “I’ve been treating patients for more than 35 years and *not once* have I encountered someone who meets the criteria for limerence.” To that end, some people with limerence have never actually met the person they’re fixated on. “It almost reminds me of the fanfare over Elvis in the ‘50s… it’s usually very one-sided,” she compares. “Limerence is built upon the illusion that the LO (typically a person you don’t know very well) embodies your fantasies, hopes and dreams of a happily ever after. At first, the trigger can almost feel euphoric—it’s like an escape from reality. But lack of reciprocation or communication from the LO feels equally intense. Not only does it re-open wounds of rejection and abandonment but it can also lead to extreme symptoms that disrupt daily life.”

The TL;DR? **Limerence is often debilitating to the point where it requires professional psychological help.** A crush, on the other hand, is something that usually dissipates over time—even when obsessive thoughts sprout up. So, if you’re here to figure out whether it’s love or limerence, ask yourself this: Are you reading this from the kitchen floor, so consumed by someone that you’re unable to move, eat or sleep? If the answer is no, you’re probably not limerent.

What TikTok is Getting Wrong

Based on what I learned from the two therapists, this seems to be another case of “relationship coaches” not getting it exactly right. After scrolling through thousands of limerence TikToks—digging into comments that all seemed to echo the same theme—I realized that these videos had nothing to do with the condition at all. Instead, they were trying to capture a specific, Gen Z-derived behavior that *feels like* limerent obsession: social media stalking.

Because of statuses and photos that date back to our first enV phones in the fourth grade, social media has become the storyteller of my generation. We see how our crush’s music taste has evolved through public Spotify playlists, we measure their success through a LinkedIn page (browsed in private mode, of course), we even get to check whether their sign is astrologically compatible with ours, thanks to birthday wishes on their Facebook wall. The problem with this? Having a crush starts to mirror our addiction to online shopping and Xbox. No longer is it enough to simply meet someone cute at the bar; we’re already looking for the next dopamine hit when we leave. Stalking their style on Instagram morphs into searching for their ex on Facebook—all while we’re anxiously biting our cuticles for a text that says, Yooo. As with all things Gen Z, we’ve inadvertently manipulated what was once a useful tool into an unhealthy habit. And what this has led to is a similar, illusionary thought process that you’d see with limerence.

On the surface, we fixate on someone’s profile to ensure they check all of our boxes: *Is he tall enough? Does he have a good job? Are his friends normal?* But on a deeper level, I suspect, this has more to do with fear of rejection than mere curiosity. (Stick with me.) First, you become addicted to the idea of the perfect relationship. The more you sleuth, the more you’re convinced: Jake from Old Tappan, New Jersey is the answer to my problems. So then, once you’re sold on Prince Charming (whom you’ve only met once), you worry whether you’ll be enough. Suddenly, you’ve spent two hours on his ex-girlfriend’s Tumblr page, collecting data on what made her commitment-worthy. The obsession, in turn, quickly becomes an effort to avoid feeling brutally rebuffed. Figure out

what Jake wants, anticipate what he doesn't want, and pivot how you show up. That way, you become the perfect one—and he won't leave you down the line.

All of this is to say that your obsession likely doesn't fit the criteria for limerence. But when you're into someone, and have access to all of their information in a digital library, it's easy to put them on a pedestal. Fantasy becomes a reality and obsession becomes a stomach ulcer. So below, I culled the absolute best pieces of advice from both therapists on how to break the cycle. (And word to the wise: If your symptoms *do* align with limerence, it's time to get off TikTok and into [dialectical behavior therapy](#).)

How to Break the Obsession Cycle

- **Step 1:** Start by recognizing what needs changing. Maybe it's the deep dive you've been doing into their social media. Or maybe, it's dropping your plans at a hat to meet them when you're out. Think about the behaviors you want to change and use that as a jumping-off point.
- **Step 2:** When you catch yourself ruminating or constantly checking your phone, pause to notice your thoughts or feelings. What are you telling yourself? Write it down. After you have a list, you want to consciously redirect your thoughts. Remind yourself what's true (and focus on things you can control). Example: Replace *his ex-girlfriend's Instagram is so much cooler than mine* with *she's just a girl like me—someone could be thinking the same about my feed*.
- **Step 3:** Once you get the hang of redirecting intrusive thoughts, make a habit of it. Maybe that starts with putting your phone in a jar for an hour after work every day. Or maybe, if you're someone who obsesses out loud, tell your friends that you can only talk about him for 30 minutes MAX. Find a way to hold yourself accountable, so eventually, it feels like second nature.
- **Step 4:** After you feel like you've triaged the immediate issues, think about why you've been pouring your energy into someone else. Whether it's getting into therapy or [journaling](#) that brings clarity, the only way to stop this issue from becoming a pattern is by figuring out where it comes from.

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