

Love, loss, and the space between: Interview with Professor David Sbarra

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I AM INCREDIBLY PLEASED to share this interview with Dr David Sbarra, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Arizona. Dr Sbarra recently published a new ebook entitled, *Love, Loss, and the Space Between: The Relationship Expert Essays*. Perhaps the best part of Dr Sbarra's new ebook – aside from the great content – is the price; at £2.42, this is a can't-miss deal! I have interviewed Dr Sbarra to learn more about his book and why it is so affordable.

Maybe you can start out by telling us about yourself and what this book (or should we say ebook) is all about.

Sure, thanks for contacting me and for talking about my new book – in truth, I don't know what to call it either. Let's stick with book. This way it sounds more official and formal, and maybe a little more serious.

I am a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Arizona, where I direct the doctoral programme in Clinical Psychology. In 2011, I started writing a series of relationship advice columns for YouBeauty. It was pitched to me as a part of Dr Mehmet Oz and Dr Michael Roizen's growing internet presence, where they marketed themselves as the You Doctors and were following-up and extending the successful content behind their books and Dr Oz's TV show.

I ended my run as the relationship expert with YouBeauty in 2014, and after finishing up a few other projects, I started to think about all the columns I had written. Earlier this year, I reread the columns for the first time in a while; they felt fresh, alive, and still very meaningful to me. I also felt like they were going to waste on the web –

just sort of rotting on an electronic vine.

I thought it would be fun and worthwhile to put all the columns together in essay format, then curate them a bit by providing some introductory remarks and organising them in a conceptually meaningful way. The result is this ebook!

As for the topics, the title of this book suggests I cover everything between love and loss. In some way, this statement is not quite accurate. I tried to take on everything in the space between love and loss, but there are some topics which I do not cover at all.

During my tenure as the relationship expert, I wrote 37 columns; often, I came up with the ideas on my own, and occasionally my editors suggested I cover a particular topic. For the most part, though, these essays represented 37 meditations about relationships; this is what I came up with when doing so monthly for three years – from why and how our brains are wired for friendships, all the way to how to break it off with a partner. I write a good amount about sex in relationships, as well as the everyday digital distractions that poison intimacy. I discuss serious stuff on the pain of infidelity and how couples can go about healing after an affair; in other essays, the topics are a little lighter – for example, why romantic comedies shape how we feel about relationships.

I do not however, cover too much about attraction, falling in love, or dating in general. I also don't say too much about how to choose the right partner or how to decide about compatibility, nor do I write about parenting and family relationships in any real way.

These are important topics, but I just never had the chance to give them much attention. In general, then, this ebook is more about how to thrive within our romantic relationships than it is about finding the love we want (and need). Certainly, these topics go hand-in-hand, but I don't want anyone to feel they were sold a bill of goods.

To help readers along, I introduce each essay with a few sentences – a brief preamble about the idea and, if I can remember, what was in my head when I wrote the specific column.

How did you decide to self-publish the book, and how in the world did you come up with the \$3.20 (£2.42) price point? And, why not publish the essays as a 'real' book?

These are great questions. When you consider why someone might write a book, I think a lot of it has to do with a need – in that the author and publisher believe people want to learn the story behind current cancer treatments, for example, or what causes veterans to develop PTSD. When I think about the topic of relationships, I see a great need. Three out of every ten marriages can be considered extremely distressed, and we have tremendous problems with loneliness and disconnection in our society. For me, from my vantage point, I saw a tremendous need to write about relationships and how to make our relationships as good as they can be, and how to fix the kind of nagging problems that plague all our relationships.

So, in my opinion, there was an absolute need for something accessible that could discuss a range of interesting and important relationship topics. At the same time, however, I also think publishing a book – and I haven't published a 'real' book before so I might be talking out of turn here – is about having a good market. Even if you, a potential author, see a need, is there a market for your book? On this front, I felt far less certain. The columns are all still freely available on the web, so you can go out now and, if you're exceptionally cheap, read them for free.

Given all of this, I thought the best route forward might be to do some sort of 'direct to consumer' ebook, and I was able to accomplish this using Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, which is an amazing system for self-publishing. Even if there's not a market for a real book, some people pay more than \$3.20 (£2.42) for a cup of coffee every day (or, twice a day for that matter, but these people are probably too caffeinated to read all that much – no offence). At this price point, I think there is a real market for the content of the book, and that is why I elected to self-publish it at a low cost.

More philosophically, by making this ebook reasonably cheap, I hope I am making it incredibly accessible to people. My goal is to give the science of close relationships away as broadly as I can and to illustrate the relevance of this work to our everyday lives.

What are some of your favourite essays in the book?

I probably have 10 or so favourites, but if I had to narrow it down to just a few, I especially like the ones about grieving on Facebook, how to deal with a workplace bully, why it's so hard to appreciate our partners. I especially like the essay on the question of whether depression can be contagious. I had a lot of fun writing the introduction to the piece. I don't think my wife has any idea (yet) that she appears in the book several times, but I think I care most deeply about the essay in which I asked myself a question about what is happening around me – Why was I doing what I was doing? Or, why was I feeling what I was feeling? – then tried to contextualise my personal observations with what I saw happening in my clinical practice or in my research.

You seem somewhat uniquely positioned to write this book because you're both a therapist and a scientist. What is the nature of your research?

This is true, but many clinical psychologists are both therapists and scientists, or at least that's the goal in our training programmes in

theory. I have tried to stay true to both sides of the so-called scientist-practitioner model, and I'd very much like to share lessons that I've learned about health and mental health with the general public. Clinical Psychology is an amazing sub-discipline and many of its best ideas are cloistered away in jargon-filled psychology journals or densely-edited volumes. I think many outside of the discipline think almost exclusively about Freud when they think about psychology, or they're inundated with far-fetched, reductionist ideas from biological psychiatry. Personally, I think it's time for a change and clinical psychology does need a bit of a voice to speak broadly in a scientifically-informed way.

Most of my research is about divorce and how people cope with difficult life events, especially social transitions. I am particularly interested in how psychological responses to these events – for example, how we grieve – might be associated with psychological responses that have health relevance down the road. People can learn more about my scientific works on <http://sbarra.faculty.arizona.edu>).

What are your goals for this ebook?

My goal for this ebook is simple: I want to make a noticeable difference in people's relationships. I don't care where this change comes from or even how people get there,

but if something in this book causes a spark, and if someone feels better in even the smallest *noticeable* way, then that's a success.

Thanks for taking the time to talk with me.

My pleasure. I hope *PsyPAG Quarterly* readers would like my ebook. Also, I am on Twitter @dsbarra. I'd love people to follow me and learn more about the book, its contents, and all manner of topics in Clinical Psychology.

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Reference

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