

ON A LEAFY SIDE STREET IN WEST HOLLYWOOD YOU'LL FIND THE WORLD'S MOST SECRETEIVE CLINICS. *COSMOPOLITAN* GETS EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO THE FIRST EVER SPECIALITY TREATMENT CENTRE FOR FAME ADDICTION >

WORDS GEORGE STARK



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**T**ucked away in a corner at a Hollywood juicier favoured by the A-list, Erica\* looks like any other celebrity customer trying to fly under the radar. She's got the oversized sunglasses, her huge curls are scraped back and she's dressed head-to-toe in black. On her feet are trainers so she can flee

from the paparazzi and intrusive fans at any given moment.

The problem is that Erica isn't famous – but she'd like to be. "I should be a celebrity by now," the 28-year-old sighs when I tell her she reminds me of an A-lister going incognito.

She looks different to her pictures on Instagram, where she has more than 10k followers. Her public persona is more polished than she is in the flesh. "I do get recognised if I'm dressed up," she says with a proud smile. "Somebody once asked for my picture thinking I was Natalie Portman."

Like many of her Hollywood peers, Erica has tried her hand at everything in an attempt to become a celebrity – so much so that she now behaves like one. In addition to dabbling in acting, singing and modelling, last year she attempted to make her debut as a DJ on the showbiz party circuit in LA, following in the footsteps of one of her idols, Paris Hilton, who she went to school with. "I begged my friend who is a professional DJ to let me join in with him, I wanted to be the face of it all. But it didn't quite pan out," she grimaces.

Instead, the privileged LA resident is working as a social media influencer for a music company as she continues her search for fame. Her parents were previously bankrolling her quest but "that's all stopped now," she says, looking down. Using her social media presence for work can be an ego boost, but she says she won't feel content until she's "legit famous".

Erica's pursuit of fame has taken its toll on her health. She's currently on medication for severe anxiety and has been seeing a therapist in Beverly Hills on a weekly basis for the last two years.

"There's no doubt in my mind that chasing fame is something I'm addicted to, and that has taken me years of therapy to address and come to terms with," she confesses.

As a showbiz journalist who has been living in LA for the last three years, I've met countless women (and men) like Erica. Their faces light up when I mention what I do for a living, thinking I can help boost or kick-start their careers. I've been asked to do favours for semi-famous stars, shoehorning their pictures into articles in a bid to raise their profiles. I know what fame-hungry looks like, and it's not always pretty. But I had no idea that the addiction had become so potent – so much so that there's now a place for people like Erica to go to seek help with their obsession.

The Lumion Center (formerly the Control Center) in LA is home to the world's first specifically designed treatment programme for fame addiction. Founded by psychiatrist and addiction specialist Dr Reef Karim in 2009, it's only in the last year that he has started to treat patients specifically for fame addiction, after spotting what he saw as a growing problem.

It's a sunny LA day when I arrive. The tall, white building with tinted windows is just a few blocks away from the world-famous Cedars-Sinai hospital (where Britney Spears was admitted at the height of her public meltdown in 2008), on a leafy side street in West Hollywood. Its discreet location makes it easy for any celebrity to be chauffeured in undetected, as many have been.

A Kardashian-esque receptionist greets me and hands over a strict

Dr Reef (below): never not practising his 'blue (surgical) steel' look



confidentiality agreement. I'm about to gain unprecedented access to the centre, including sitting in on a group therapy session with patients currently being treated for fame addiction. The agreement forbids me to disclose the names of any famous faces I might recognise beyond this point.

In the waiting room – all white furniture and mahogany floors – there's the usual pile of fashion and entertainment magazines. Only here, you might find yourself sitting next to one of the cover stars.

Dr Reef (as he's known) ushers me into his office. He's got that LA charm and is obviously used to making people feel at ease. It's no surprise he's a regular on US TV



screens, appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, CNN and Fox News – perhaps ironic for someone trying to coax people away from fame’s lure.

On the clinic’s website, fame addiction is described as ‘a behavioural condition centred on the desperate need for validation at all costs.’ Dr Reef explains that celebrities crave being seen, adored, and valued by others. “It gives them an inner rush, or a hit of meaning, self-love and stress reduction – even though it is usually fleeting.”

While he acknowledges that there are “healthy celebrities”; the ones he’s seen – who he can’t name for legal reasons – are often in existential crisis. “They had no idea who they were. So

they were acting out in an addictive way by popping pills, drinking too much, having too much sex, gambling, shopping, or becoming obsessed with video games.”

However, fame addiction isn’t just a celebrity problem. Dr Reef points out that “most individuals have a fantasy of what fame could bring them – status, money, desirability, sex appeal, women/men, attraction”; and that while celebrity status seemed unattainable to many of us for a long time,

the internet and social media has made fame tantalisingly reachable.

The Lumion Center’s clientele now includes everyone from actors, professional athletes and reality stars

“It gives them an inner rush, or a hit of meaning”

to the man off the street who isn’t famous but is desperate to be. They pay between £4,000 and £20,000 a month, depending on each individual’s needs, and the average client will stay with the programme for at least three to six months.

Fame addiction is not recognised as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, but it’s a term often churned out in the media. Dr Reef tells me his patients are usually seeking help because they’re depressed, lonely or, more commonly, suffering from anxiety. They don’t necessarily walk in thinking they’re addicted to fame, but he’ll identify the condition.

From there, he and his team play the role of an “emotional detective”, conducting psychological testing, brain imaging and pharmacogenetic research, to work out why their clients have developed this addiction. Patients are given treatments tailored to their individual needs, which could be anything from therapy to holistic treatments or acupuncture. The clinic also conducts group therapy sessions – which is what I’m sitting in on.

Dr Reef leads the group of six patients and begins by writing the key symptoms of fame addiction on a whiteboard. These include problems controlling impulses, being overly sensitive to rejection, using people for your own gain, a crisis of identity and living in a fantasy world.

At this point, he stops to ask whether any members of the group would date someone just because of their success or fame. Half the group say they absolutely would.

He writes down the final two symptoms – self-destructive behaviours caused by a lack of self-esteem and control, and struggling with ‘impression management’ (being constantly worried about image, who to be seen with and how you’re viewed).

David\*, a musician who is coming to terms with the after-effects of celebrity now he’s no longer on the >

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road with his famous rock band, raises his hand. Dressed in ripped jeans and a T-shirt revealing a smattering of tattoos, he swigs on an energy drink as he talks about missing the rush he used to get while performing. “The feeling on stage was better than any drug,” he shares. “Better than heroin.”

An attractive red-haired social-media star speaks next. Overwhelmed from living her life online, she reveals she’s now come off all social media platforms. “I was being an inauthentic version of myself,” she says. “I was living a lie. But when I tried to be the real me, I just couldn’t do it.”

Then a woman named Haylee\* introduces herself, who Dr Reef informs me was born into a famous family. Dressed in gym gear, her flashy jewellery and Cartier watch give away her privilege. She tells the group that she’s recently been cut off by her famous father for refusing to follow his rules. “I have a toxic family,” she says. “Everyone caters to my father. He wanted me to be his protégé. All he cares about is money and status.”

Her mother – who mixes in celebrity circles – is paying for the treatment, though it doesn’t sound like she acknowledges she’s part of the problem. “My mother is always posting pictures of herself supposedly looking happy and competing with her famous friends,” Haylee complains.

As the group session ends and patients hug and congratulate each other on what they’ve shared, I’m invited to sit in on Haylee’s individual therapy session with Dr Reef.

She seems to be dealing with her parents’ addiction to the limelight rather than her own, clearly exasperated by her family’s constant need for fame and attention, explaining she’d be happy with a “normal” life.

Having heard these stories, I wonder if fame addiction is really as tangible as Dr Reef makes out, or whether it’s just a new label for age-old problems. Then I remember something another patient mentioned. “Everyone at my

# FAME HUNTERS

*The celebrities who, in their own words, were desperate for their time in the limelight*



### Jennifer Lawrence

“I always knew that I was going to be famous. I don’t know how else to describe it. I used to wonder, ‘Am I going to be a local TV person? Am I going to be a motivational speaker?’”

### Kim Kardashian

“Every time I’d go to the gym or go out to eat, every paparazzi would ask me questions and I would be like, ‘Hey guys!’”



### Lily Allen

“[I’d see] how people treated famous people better than they treated not-famous people. I think I wanted to be famous, to walk into a room and someone show you to a nice table – just that special treatment.”

school wants to be famous,” he said. “It’s all I ever hear from my friends.”

The dictionary describes fame as the ‘state of being known by many people.’ Social media has shifted the landscape and made that possible for more of us than ever. By chasing followers, likes and retweets, aren’t we all seeking a piece of the limelight?

Research backs up the idea that social media is fuelling a fame obsession. A study by UCLA in 2013 found that children aged nine to 15 who use social media a lot place a higher value on fame than those who don’t use social media as much.

American psychologist Jean Twenge, co-author of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, often appears in the media arguing that young people are becoming more narcissistic (which she defines as “the fantasy that you are better than you really are”). She points to

factors such as the rise of reality TV, and constant praise from parents and the internet, which “encourages people to constantly promote themselves”.

According to Dr Reef, it’s only likely to get worse. “Similar to the internet creating more online access for gambling- and shopping-addicted individuals, fame addicts have more available triggers because of social media,” he says.

He clearly thinks he’s onto something by identifying fame addiction, but not all psychologists agree. Dr Tom Stafford, a lecturer in psychology at Leeds University, warns that people should be careful about using the term ‘addiction.’ “It has a medical definition, and can define people who face profound challenges. Applying the label to things like fame, cell phones or email is unwise without extreme caution,” he explains.

However, Dr Reef insists that, like other addictions, fame can be “desired and consumed in excess to the point of pathology and dysfunction”.

At the moment, his fame addiction clinic still feels like a niche haven for a privileged few coming to terms with their own reality. But if he’s right, we might see a whole industry emerge to cater to the fallout of fame chasers.

In my job I’ve spent enough time around celebrities to know fame isn’t as alluring as it appears. I just hope there’s light at the end of the tunnel for those battling a self-destructive craving for fame – and that it lasts longer than the frenzied flashbulbs of the paparazzi. ♦



### BEHIND THE SCENES

#### George Stark

“The Lumion Center is on my doorstep in LA, yet I never knew it was there.

I had no idea that fame addiction existed before writing this, but now I feel as though I could spot the symptoms a mile off. It’s both fascinating and frightening, and certainly a topic I will be discussing the next time I interview a big celebrity in Hollywood.”

PHOTOGRAPHS JOHANNA PARKIN, SHUTTERSTOCK; GETTY IMAGES. \*NAMES IN THIS FEATURE HAVE BEEN CHANGED. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE LUMION CENTER, VISIT THELUMIONCENTER.COM OR DOCTORREEF.COM