

### **HELPING THOSE WHO ARE SEXUALLY ADDICTED by Bud Searcy**

In America today, 51% of Christian men are addicted to pornography, and 33% of Christian men and women have on-going sexual relations with people other than their spouse. It is an understatement to say that the problem of sexual addiction is pervasive among American Christians and clergy members.

What is sexual addiction? It is NOT Primarily a behavior issue or a moral issue. Sex addiction is primarily a coping mechanism; is primarily an identity issue; and, is primarily a spiritual issue. Sexual addiction is repetitive, uncontrollable sexual activity of any kind. Whatever the type or the amount there has been some attempt by the addict to stop. Ultimately any effort to do so has been unsuccessful, and the addict feels his/her life to be unmanageable. The sexual activity is used, like any addiction, to escape or to avoid feelings, to reduce stress or as a way of connecting intimately with others. All sex addicts feel detached, isolated and alone. The illusion is that orgasm is equated with intimacy. In fact the addiction often becomes a counterfeit relationship.

Like all other addictions, sex addiction is progressive. In other words, the frequency of sexual activity increases over time. Also, the type of sexually addictive behavior may change over time. The typical building blocks of sexual addiction are fantasy/sexual obsession, masturbation and pornography. Eventually the addict may become involved in affairs, promiscuous sex, anonymous sex with strangers, phone sex, exhibitionism, voyeurism or even criminal, exploitive forms of addiction such as rape or incest.

Since, for the addict, life centers around "getting a fix," many sex addicts are poly-addicted. The most prevalent addictions are behavioral, lifestyle, relational and emotional addictions. Examples of behavioral addictions include substance abuse, exercise, and perfectionism, to name a few. One type of lifestyle addiction is religious addiction-i.e. addiction to certain religious activities and rituals, or addiction to certain types of religious experiences. Relationship addictions include co-dependency, the incessant need for approval or need to be needed by others, and emotional dependency. Finally, individuals can be addicted to certain emotions, such as rage, self-pity, jealousy or envy. It is important to remember that while most sex addicts are poly-addicted, all addictions do not have the same severity.

The addictive cycle consists of five stages. The first stage is preoccupation in which the addict is mentally preoccupied with some form of sexual behavior or desires. The second stage is ritualization, in which the addict secretly and often elaborately plans the behavior. The third stage is sexual compulsivity, or the "acting-out" stage. The fourth stage involves overwhelming feelings of despair after the activity is finished. The final stage is "triggers," which lead to re-enactment of the addictive cycle. The most popular triggers for sex addicts are HUNGER, ANGER, LONELINESS, TIREDNESS (HALT).

The first step in helping the sex addict is creating a safe atmosphere within your local congregation for them to be real, honest and accountable. In order to experience healing, sex addicts must experience community. Healing from sexual addiction can never occur in isolation, as part of the problem is that addicts are detached from other people. Secondly, a loving community can diffuse the power of secrecy and break denial for the addict. Relationships within the body of Christ can provide necessary support

and accountability for the addict. The local congregation can provide a safe place confession and repentance. Finally, healthy relationships within the church can mediate the incarnation of Jesus Christ, making both the grace and power of His resurrection tangible to the struggling addict.

The second step in helping the sex addict is to develop a plan to stop the behaviors. First, you must identify the triggers and discover options in dealing with them. In other words, what feelings, experiences, stresses typically lead to preoccupation about sexual activity. Secondly, define the rituals and stop the addictive cycle there, for example, by calling a friend. Since most addicts act impulsively, it may take some time to recognize the triggers and rituals that precede addictive behavior. A typical ritual for some gay men is cruising parks before having anonymous sex. Thirdly, help the addict implement a strategy, or battle plan, to deal with potential triggers in the future. Finally, seek to discover what the addictive behavior is really all about. What emotions are underneath the behavior? What pain is the addict trying to soothe? The core beliefs at the heart of sexually addictive behavior are:

- I am basically a bad, unworthy person.
- No one would love me as I am.
- My needs are never going to be met if I have to depend on others.
- Sex is my most important need.

The third stage in helping individual who are sexually addicted is to dismantle the addictive belief system. The addict will need to learn to renounce the lies he has believed, and then correct those lies by stating the truth as God sees it. Finally, the addict will need to walk according to these truths and not according to their feelings.

Next, the sex addict will need to develop a vibrant relationship with God, making prayer and reading Scripture part of his/her daily life. Learning to practice the presence of God will be extremely helpful. As with other false beliefs, the addict will also need to change his/her impaired thinking about God.

Another important aspect of ministry to the sex addict will involve healing developmental deficits and hurts from the past. The addict will need help and re-assurance in developing relational skills. Most likely, the addict came from a dysfunctional family and will need healing from experiences with either or both parents. The addict may experience sexual, physical, verbal or emotional abuse, which will need to be dealt with thoroughly, and may require the help of a professional Christian therapist. Furthermore, sex addicts are always filled with shame and self-loathing over their behavior. They will need to learn to love and forgive themselves as Christ forgives them.

Finally, as you minister to men and women who are sexually addicted, "care-fronting"-or, confronting in love-will always be an on-going part of the relationship, for a number of reasons. Commitment to the healing process may wane at times, because the addict is used to being "seduced" by intense feelings. Secondly, care-fronting will be necessary because the sex addict's life has been characterized by avoiding, shirking responsibility and playing the role of victim. Becoming isolated and uninvolved has been a way of life so you may need to pursue contact and communication at times. Finally, be aware



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that the sex addict may, consciously or unconsciously, transfer to "more acceptable" addictions-such as gluttony or religious addiction.

*This teaching was presented during one of OneByOne's workshops at General Assembly in Syracuse, NY. Rev. Bud Searcy, is founder of Transforming Congregations, a member of the board of directors of Exodus International, and director of a local counseling ministry in Fresno, CA.*