

Sexual Addiction: Too Much of a Good Thing?

Addicted to sex?

Can you be addicted to sex, just as you can to drugs or alcohol?

Ask a sexual addict-or someone who's been affected by an addict's behavior-a spouse, child, other family member, friend or victim. Their experience says: "yes." Although it's often portrayed as a "victimless" individual choice, sexual addiction can have very negative and long-lasting effects on addicts, on those in relationships with them and on society.

What does sexual addiction look like?

Sexual addicts engage in obsessive/compulsive sexual behavior that causes severe stress to themselves and their families. They make sex the center of their lives, become willing to sacrifice what they value most and exhibit behaviors such as:

- compulsive heterosexual and homosexual relationships
- exhibitionism
- voyeurism
- incest
- rape and violence
- compulsive masturbation
- obsession with pornography
- prostitution
- indecent phone calls
- child molesting

In his book, *False Intimacy: Understanding the Struggle of Sexual Addiction*, Dr. Harry Schaumberg states: "For the sex addict, each external sexual act is a desperate attempt to be involved in a relationship without being truly known and having to take the risks involved in developing real intimacy."

Addicts are unable to stop their involvement in behaviors they generally know are destructive, and usually progress to more and more dangerous behaviors.

How big a problem is sexual addiction?

Over the past several decades, our society has grown in its understanding of drug, alcohol and food addictions, but only in recent years have we begun to understand sexual addiction. Men and women use sex as a mood-altering substance-like drugs or alcohol-to cope with relational pain. Sexual addiction is characterized by persons using sex to get a "high," and then finding themselves needing ever greater or more powerful "doses." Sexual addiction affects 3-6% of our population.

In his book, *Out of the Shadows*, psychologist Patrick Carnes, Ph.D., a leading U.S. researcher on sexual addiction, says addicts have these core beliefs:

- 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 upon others.
- Sex is my most important need.

Men and women involved in Sexaholics Anonymous, a recovery program for lust and sex addiction based on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), have discovered that lust is the driving force behind their sexually self-destructive thinking and behavior. Images, the media and/or fantasy can serve as "triggers" that lead to their taking the first "drink."

Is Pornography a Factor in Sexual Addiction?

Society continues to debate whether pornography is positive/neutral (entertaining or educational) or harmful. The word itself comes from the Greek words "porno" and "graphia" meaning "depictions of the activities of whores," and generally means "material (as books or a photograph) that depicts erotic behavior and is intended to cause sexual excitement." Pornography, including that which is readily available on the Internet, degrades objectifies and dehumanizes women and children.

Dr. Archibald D. Hart observes in his book, *The Sexual Man: Masculinity without Guilt*: "Most young males have their sexual beliefs and attitudes shaped by pornography. Exposure often begins at age thirteen. This distorts their views of how women feel about sex and what can reasonably be expected from sex...."

Dynamics of Sexual Addiction

Dr. Victor Cline, a nationally recognized expert on the effects of pornography and its relationship to sexual addictions and abuse, says four factors characterize the condition:

- Addiction-Pornography provides a very powerful sexual stimulant or aphrodisiac effect, followed by sexual release, most often through masturbation. The exciting and powerful imagery can then be recalled and elaborated on in subsequent fantasies.
- Escalation-Over time, addicts require rougher and more explicit and deviant material to get "high." They may push their partners into increasingly bizarre sexual activities. And they come to prefer the imagery of pornography, accompanied by masturbation, to sexual intercourse itself, diminishing their capacity to express real affection.
- Desensitization-material (in books, magazines or films/videos) which was first perceived as shocking, illegal, repulsive or immoral-though still sexually arousing-is seen as acceptable. The sexual activity depicted becomes legitimized in the person, s mind, and he/she comes to believe that "everybody does it."

- Acting out Sexually-There is an increasing tendency to act out behaviors viewed in pornography. Addiction locks persons into these behaviors-no matter what the negative consequences. It disturbs marital and family bonds, and increases the possibility of a person committing a serious sex crime.

A wide range of research backs up Dr. Cline's analysis. For example:

- In Don't Call It Love, Dr. Patrick Carnes relates that among 932 sex addicts studied, 90% of men and 77% of women said pornography was significant to their addictions. he also found that childhood sexual abuse and frequent use of pornography accompanied by masturbation are key parts of the formation of sexually addictive behavior.
- R.J. McGuire explains the conditioning process: "As a man repeatedly masturbates to a vivid sexual fantasy as his exclusive outlet, the pleasurable experiences endow the deviant fantasy with increasing erotic value. The orgasm experienced then provides the critical reinforcing event for the conditioning of the fantasy preceding or accompanying the act."
- Studies by D.R. Evans and B.T. Jackson found that deviant masturbatory fantasy very significantly affected the habit strength of the subject's sexual deviation.
- Dr. W. Marshall conducted research with rapists, almost half of whom used pornography depicting consenting sex to arouse themselves before seeking out a victim.
- Sex offenders studied by G.G. Abel said that pornography increased their appetites for deviant activities.

Profile of a sexual addict

Contrary to the stereotype, a sexual addict doesn't necessarily wear a trench coat. Here's a profile:

- Background-83% report being sexually abused, 73% physically abused and 97% emotionally abused/neglected as children.
- Education/Socioeconomic-42% earn more than \$30,000/year and 58% are college graduates ; 65% are professionals with a college and/or graduate degree.
- Emotional State-Addicts feel powerless and out of control, and need to maintain an environment in which they are in control and never feel bad; they are attracted to "persons" in pornography who can't say "no," abandon or reject them; 83% have other addictions such as alcoholism, chemical dependency, eating disorders or compulsive working, spending or gambling problems.
- Number of Partners/Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)-Addicts may have many partners and frequent sex in a variety of circumstances. Many times, the fear of contracting AIDS or other STDs is not enough to make them stop their behavior.

Typical sexual addiction scenarios

- A salesman who travels extensively promises himself before each trip that he won't watch the hard-core cable TV movies in his hotel. But he does.
- A woman who reads romance novels fantasizes herself into the sexual situations in them. After a while, she prefers her fantasy world to real life and tried to re-create it in a series of affairs. She tells herself that she can quit any time. But she finds she can't .
- An attorney visits hard-core pornography outlets in his area. He fears the damage that could result to his reputation if he's "found out" and always tells himself: "This is the last time." But it never is.
- A pastor's wife is sexually involved outside of her marriage. Terrified of the potential damage to her husband, family and church if discovered-she promises herself she'll stop. But she doesn't .
- An executive repeatedly demands certain sexual behaviors from his wife, but is always turned down. Frustrated, he turns to prostitutes. After each episode, he's remorseful and tells himself he won't do it again. But he does.
- A teenager desperately seeks affection by becoming sexually involved with one man after another. After repeatedly failing to get the affection she is after, she wants to stop. But she doesn't .

All of these persons promise themselves that they won't maintain their addiction. But they do...until they seek help and move toward recovery.

How do I know if I-or someone I know-is a sexual addict?

The answers to these questions will help you determine if sexual addiction has you-or another person-in its grip:

1. Have you ever thought you needed help for your sexual thinking or behavior?
2. That you'd be better off if you didn't keep "giving in?"
3. That sex or stimuli are you controlling you?
4. Have you ever tried to stop or limit doing what you felt was wrong in your sexual behavior?
5. Do you resort to sex to escape, relieve anxiety, or because you can't cope?
6. Do you feel guilt, remorse or depression afterward?
7. Has your pursuit of sex become more compulsive?
8. Does it interfere with relations with your spouse?
9. Do you have to resort to images or memories during sex?
10. Does an irresistible impulse arise when the other party makes the overtures or sex is offered?
11. Do you keep going from one "relationship" or lover to another?
12. Do you feel the "right relationship" would help you stop lusting, masturbating, or being so promiscuous?
13. Do you have a destructive need-a desperate sexual or emotional need for someone?

14. Does pursuit of sex make you careless for yourself or the welfare of your family or others?
15. Has your effectiveness or concentration decreased as sex has become more compulsive?
16. Do you lost time from work for it?
17. Do you turn to a lower environment when pursuing sex?
18. Do you want to get away from the sex partner as soon as possible after the act?
19. Although your spouse is sexually compatible, do you still masturbate or have sex with others?
20. Have you ever been arrested for a sex-related offense?

©SA Literature. Reprinted with permission; does not imply endorsement or affiliation.

If you recognize yourself or someone you know in the above questions, you may want to talk with a professional counselor or 12-step group. There is hope-and effective treatment.

Real Help is Available...Today

If you or someone else has a sexual addiction problem, the steps to recovery are:

1. Face the problem. Admit that sexual addiction is a problem. Most people need someone to help them take this step.
2. Seek help in a "safe" place. The most effective programs treat the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the problem, and involve both of these elements:
 - Psychologist/counselor-A skilled professional can provide objective, diagnostic and clinical help-inpatient or outpatient (including phone consultation)
 - Support group-A group offers the "arms and legs" of acceptance, understanding, affirmation and loving care. Groups using AA's 12 Steps are one of the most proven paths to recovery. Persons accept their addiction, and admit that they are powerless over their sexual behavior and that their lives are unmanageable. Those involved in Sexaholics Anonymous, for example, discover that victory over this mental-spiritual obsession brings release from the "acting out" in any of its forms. They then begin rebuilding relationships by taking responsibility for what they've done, making amends where possible and embracing healthy values.
3. Maintain/strengthen recovery. As with other addictions, maintaining recovery is a day-to-day, lifetime process. Recovery gains strength as the person deals with the addiction's root issues. After-care groups are an option.

Treating sexual addiction can be likened to getting medical help for a badly broken leg. A person needs to seek emergency treatment, follow the doctor's orders and be rehabilitated. Time for healing is part of the prescription.

Common Questions/Concerns

Will my confidentiality be protected? Addicts who want to change require a "safe" place-a counselor or 12-Step group-where their confidentiality will be respected.

What if I can't afford treatment? Your insurance may cover all or most of the cost. Many programs charge on a sliding scale; 12-Step groups are free. It's always worth the investment.

How can I help my spouse or friend recover? Educate yourself about addiction so you can be an encourager and avoid "enabling" behavior that delays recovery. Since the spouse often feels responsible, he/she should join a support group for spouses of addicts and seek professional help also. Realize that there any be occasional relapses.

What can parents do to help prevent sexual addiction? Teach children that sex is a beautiful gift, and that anything that degrades the love between a man and a woman is wrong. Warn them about pornography. Cultivate a healthy openness of communication so they'll feel free to talk with you about anything without fear, guilt or shame.

Don't Let Another Day Pass

If you-or someone else-is reluctant to seek help, please consider that addiction is progressive. Knowing there is a sexual addiction problem and not seeking help can be likened to knowing that there are cancer cells active in your body and doing nothing about it. There's no better time than now.

Call us today for a referral to counselors, groups, tapes or other resources-resources that can make a real difference to you or someone you care for.

National Coalition for the Protection of Children & Families

<http://www.purehope.net>

(513) 521-6227