



The Truth About Sex Addiction

by Moshe Yachnes, LMSW, CSAT, CASACT

Sex addiction is a serious problem. It is a silent, painful and misunderstood addiction, one that according to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy affects nearly 12 million people in the United States.

What is sexual addiction?

Sex addiction is defined as any compulsive sexual behavior that interferes with normal living and results in negative consequences to the individual, family, friends, and/or loved ones. Other names referring to the same disorder include, hypersexuality, sexual dependency and sexual compulsivity. Sex addicts often place sex on the highest priority and are incapable of stopping despite an increase of stress and/or anxiety it causes. Sex and sexual fantasies become the primary importance of an addict's life. It dominates their thought patterns and becomes the central focus in their everyday living. They are using the "orgasmic high" to escape the pain of their current reality. They continue to sexually act out despite an increase in negative consequences.

What are the signs of a sex addict?

Unmanageability:

Unmanageability refers to a person's inability to feel or be productive because of the distraction caused by compulsive sexual activities. Dealing with the responsibilities of everyday life become overwhelming. The sex addict begins to neglect the most basic components of his/her life.

Relationships begin to deteriorate, responsibilities at work are effected, and there develops an overall physical or emotional distress. Continued sexual acting out demonstrates one's inability to control his/her relationship with sex and is a potential sign of sex addiction.

Pre-occupation:

Pre-occupation refers to constantly thinking about sex or sexually acting out. An individual who finds him/herself often planning his/her next sexual encounter, constant focus on sex, searching for new and increased sexual stimulation and all indicators of sex addiction.

Frustration, sadness, or fear because of recent sexual encounters is another sign of emotional pre-occupation a sex addict struggles with.

Sexual escalation/Tolerance:

Sexual escalation refers to an increase in sexual behaviors, including but not limited to, amount of time spent, risk taking, aggressiveness, and/or dangerous sexual behaviors. Tolerance includes not being satisfied physically or emotionally through previous sexual behaviors.

Emotional:

Emotional signs refer to overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt, generalized anxiety and/or symptoms of depression can be signs of emotional consequences associated with sex addiction.

What behaviors indicate sex addiction?

Common behaviors include, but are not limited to compulsive masturbation, compulsive heterosexual and homosexual relationships, excessive pornography, prostitution, multiple affairs, massage parlours, phone sex, web-cam sex, anonymous sex, dangerous or risky sexual behaviors, and objectifying the opposite sex.

What are the most reported addictive sexual behaviors?

Fantasy Sex:

Sexually charged fantasies, relationships, and situations. The mental imagery serves as the pornography.

Seductive Role Sex:

Seduction of partners. Arousal is based on conquest and diminishes rapidly after initial contact.

Voyeuristic Sex:

Visual arousal to escape into an obsessive trance.

Exhibitionistic Sex:

Attracting attention to one's body. Arousal stems from the reaction of the viewer- whether shock or interest.

Paying for Sex:

Arousal is connected to payment for sex and with time the arousal actually becomes connected to money itself.

Trading Sex:

Selling or bartering sex for power. Arousal is based on gaining control of others by using sex as leverage.

Intrusive Sex:

Boundary violation without discovery. Sexual arousal occurs by violating boundaries with no repercussions.

Pain Exchange Sex:

Being humiliated or hurt as part of sexual arousal, hurting or denigrating another sexually, or both.

Exploitive Sex:

Arousal patterns are based on target "types" of vulnerability.

What does "loss of control" mean regards to sex addiction?

In order to understand what "loss of control" actually means, we need to define the term hijacked brain. Addicts essentially have rewired their brains. Their neurotransmitters (dendrites and synapses) have been programmed so that they can perform certain risky behaviors (drinking, drug use, eating, gambling, and/or sex) and respond to the stimuli without processing the actual emotion. Relapse triggers effect maladaptive responses to stress, emotional pain, fear, loneliness, internal chaos, or specific childhood scenarios of sexual abuse or sexual trauma. Breakthrough scientific discoveries about brain function are helping us to understand the biology of this disease. (P. Carnes)

What are some statistics about cybersex?

Today, over 70% of sex addicts report having problematic online sexual behaviors. Two-thirds of those engaged have such despair over their internet activities that they experience suicidal thoughts. Sexual acting out online has been shown to manifest in similar off-line behavior. People who already were sex addicts find the internet accelerates their problem. Those who develop an addiction in the online space quickly start to act out in new ways off-line. An addict's "arousal template" that has been established through machine-enhanced stimuli cannot be appropriately re-created in real life, leading to further emotional pain, depression and hopelessness. One of the pioneering researchers of this problem, the late Dr. Al Cooper, described online sexual behavior as the "crack-cocaine" of sexual compulsivity.

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