

## Sexual Addiction

It's tempting to avoid the term "sexual addiction," since it has been overused of late, but it does describe a very real problem that can be extremely destructive, both to the individual and to the marriage partner.

**The sexual addict is a person who tries to use sex to fill non-sexual needs. Sex becomes not an expression of love in a mature relationship, but rather a compulsive (and often highly ritualized) response to the emotional stresses of life.**

**The expressions of sexual addiction are many** - habitual masturbation, pornography, telephone or cyber sex, prostitution, strip shows, even voyeurism and rape. The beginning of most of these addictions are formed long before adulthood, so the addictions are carried into marriage. This is helpful for the spouse to understand, both for their peace of mind and also in understanding their spouse's unique problem.

We firmly believe that, in Christ, healing is possible for the sex addict. The road to recovery is challenging, but there is help. There are now many individuals and ministries that understand the unique and difficult struggle of those bound by sexual addiction .

### Some Characteristics of Sex Addiction

**The sex is shameful.** The addict feels shame about what he or she is doing, or more accurately, about what he or she *has done*, usually immediately after engaging in sex acts that violate some of the person's standards. Or the shame may be denied by calling it normal for "a real man," or by focusing on others: "She wanted it," or by engaging in it again right away so the shame is exchanged for pleasure. Thus a married man may feel remorse after having sex with his best friend's wife, rationalize that his friend wasn't sexually satisfying her, and avoid going to bed with his own wife afterward by staying up and masturbating while watching a movie on the sex channel.

**The sex is secret.** The sex addict more and more comes to live a double life--perhaps well-known, respected and admired in his visible life but secretly engaging regularly in sexual acts that would be shocking to those who know and love him. So a sexually addicted minister could be revered on Sunday morning for preaching on the sinfulness of adultery and fornication and then engage in those behaviors himself at a modeling studio or adult bookstore on Monday afternoon, having told the church staff or his family a lie about his whereabouts. Or a gay man might tell his relationship partner that he is going to visit a friend but goes to a park to cruise for anonymous sex instead.

**The sexual behavior is abusive.** It violates someone else's choice or exceeds their understanding. **There is the man who manipulates or coerces his wife into being sexual with him.** The sex may also be abusive to the sex addict him or herself, such as masturbating to the point of physical injury or cutting or pinching oneself for sexual arousal.

**The Internet has become the newest, most rapidly growing form of sexual acting out for many sex addicts today. A lot of sex addicts have added computer sex to their repertoire,** as it fills a need for "more, easier and better." For the cybersex addict, increasing amounts of time are spent "surfing," downloading, creating files, masturbating, reading information posted on sexual bulletin boards, exchanging sexual information live with others in sexual chat rooms or via computer cameras, or directing their own live sex shows on interactive sites--in short, looking for what's new, what's better than last time. The Internet just happens to provide many of the things sex addict's seek, all in one place: isolation, secrecy, fantasy material, endless variety, around-the-clock availability, instant accessibility and a rapid means of returning, low or no cost. (The cost factor can change, however, if the sex addict keeps charging view-for-pay services on the internet, such as live interaction with performers who follow the customer's instructions for engaging in all kinds of prescribed sex acts that the customer can watch and masturbate to.)

Since one of the characteristics of sexual addiction is that it is progressive--that is, the habitual behaviors progressively become more frequent, varied and extreme, with more frequent and extreme consequences--sex addicts on the Internet often experience a rapid progression of their addiction. The new sexual thrills lead to spending huge amounts of time, moving more quickly into more extreme behaviors, taking greater risks, and getting caught more frequently. Thus, internet sex has been referred to as the "crack cocaine" of sex addiction. Actually, the sped-up progression of the sex addict's problem via the internet can turn into a blessing, since it can move the addict into the consequences more quickly that can cause him or her to get help.

### **If You Are a Spouse or Partner of a Sex Addict**

If you are in relationship with someone you think is sexually addicted, your efforts to help may be actually adding to the problem rather than achieving the results you desire. Sex addicts usually wind up in relationships with partners who unconsciously fit right into the addictive patterns. For example, typically the sex addict keeps on returning again and again to the sexually addictive behaviors and the partner accepts what is going on, or overlooks clues that would suggest something is wrong, or threatens to leave but doesn't (or leaves and returns when the addict promises to change, only to learn later the addict did not stop), or takes responsibility for trying to control the addict's behavior. None of these strategies work and actually add to the problem. What the partner has to realize is that she or he needs help too in order to get out of her or his own addictive habits. The partner will need to learn how to stop enabling the sex addict and how to focus on her/himself, and how to take stands or draw boundaries that actually work.

### **Some Characteristics of a Sex Addict's Partner**

A phrase that is used to describe a woman or a man in relationship with a sexual addict is a *codependent of a sex addict*, or co-addict for short. In her book, *Back From Betrayal: Recovery for Women Involved With Sex Addicted Men*, Jennifer Schneider presents a cohesive description of a co-addict. Schneider points out that the co-addict's self esteem comes from her success as a people-pleaser. Her main goal in life is to try to figure out what her partner wants, and then give it to him. To assure success at pleasing, she may become extremely sensitive to the momentary mood of her partner. She may constantly worry about what he thinks about her and try extremely hard not to make a mistake. Because of these self-defeating characteristics, the co-addict usually is much more in tune with what someone else wants than with her own wants and needs. The underlying reason for such a belief is the co-addict's conviction that no one could love her for herself, just as she is, that she must earn love and devotion. The energy expended on such an endeavor can take a heavy toll on the co-addict as she tries repeatedly and unsuccessfully to "keep her man happy." She may engage in a variety of behaviors that range from the smallest violation of her value system to the truly dangerous and destructive. The co-addict, in an effort to please the addict, may do the following things. She may change her hair color, lose/gain weight, quit her job/go to work, or wear sexy underwear. Or she may perform sex acts that are unpleasant or repulsive to her, or attend events that shock and confuse her, swing with others, or expose herself to sexually transmitted diseases. Or, most importantly for a co-addict with children, she may use them and/or ignore them in her efforts to focus on the addict-partner.

To "please and keep her man" the co-addict will often attempt to become indispensable to the addict. Not surprisingly, with the need to be indispensable, the co-addict's most constant emotional state is one of fear. In their book, *Women Who Love Sex Addicts: Help For Healing from the Effects of a Relationship With A Sex Addict*, Douglas Weiss and Dianne DeBusk list some of the common fears a co-addict may experience. The list includes such beliefs as *I was afraid I wasn't woman enough for him; I was afraid I could never please him sexually; I was afraid there was something wrong with me; I was afraid I was a pervert; I was afraid that I wouldn't protect my kids if they were being hurt by him; I was afraid of his anger; I was afraid he would give me a disease*. Living with such fears inevitably leads the co-addict to attempt to control the addict's behavior. Her (unconscious) rationale for this is that if she can keep him within certain parameters of behavior, she won't have to experience her fears of inadequacy and of being abandoned. In reality, such attempts are about as effective as trying to keep the dam from bursting by running around and sticking a finger in the many holes that keep appearing. Nevertheless, the co-addict repeatedly attempts to control the

addict with such behaviors as calling or beeping him several times a day in order to find out where he is; checking his wallet for tell-tale evidence; going through credit card bills; checking his shirts for lipstick smudges or his dirty underwear for signs of semen; throwing away pornographic material. She may also attempt to manipulate his behavior with a variety of behaviors of her own, including acting overly understanding and/or becoming a screamer-yeller. Neither works; nor does anything else she tries.

### **What Usually Happens Without Help.**

Since the disease of sexual addiction is, like any addiction, progressive, that is, it gets more time-consuming and costly as time goes by, eventually the secret life of the sexual addict is discovered or uncovered and the couple experiences a tremendous crisis. Often, the sexual addict will then enter a period of extreme remorse, beg for forgiveness, and promise never to act out again. His promises at the time are probably sincere and most co-addicts want to believe the words. A honeymoon period may follow, including intense sexual activity between the two people. Since, for the co-addict, sex is often a sign of love, she may be lulled into believing everything is really all right, offer forgiveness and bind up her wounded spirit and go on. She is later shattered to discover the unaccounted for time and secrecy has returned.