

What is sex addiction?

by Olivia Ianculescu

source: Morningnewsbrief.ro

Sexual addiction, which is one of the most overlooked addictions, together with food, work or shopping is generally defined as “a progressive intimacy disorder characterized by compulsive sexual thoughts and acts.”¹ According to the NCSA (National Council on Sexual Addiction), an estimated 18-24 million people suffer from sex addiction in the US.²

The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity sees sex addiction as “engaging in persistent and escalating patterns of sexual behavior acted out despite increasing negative consequences to self and others.”³

Sex addiction misses the whole idea of love and intimacy. It masks feelings of under-confidence, vulnerability, guilt, shame, anger, envy, fear of abandonment and loneliness. It can hide emotional attachment to strong, authoritarian figures; confusing love with physical and sexual attraction; need to rescue or be rescued or devastating past trauma such as childhood sexual abuse.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders, Volume Four classifies sex addiction under the category “Sexual Disorders Not Otherwise Specified,” as “distress about a pattern of repeated sexual relationships involving a succession of lovers who are experienced by the individual only as things to be used” and also involving “compulsive searching for multiple partners, compulsive fixation on an unattainable partner, compulsive masturbation, compulsive love relationships and compulsive sexuality in a relationship.”⁴

Unlike alcoholism, drug or gambling addictions, which involve a dependency problem with substances or activities that are not essential to our survival, sexual activity is different. Its reproductive role is a crucial requirement for human survival. Sexual desire is one of the indicators of healthy humans, while a low interest can be a sign of a medical problem or psychiatric illness.

So far, it is not known why some people, and not others, develop an addiction to sex. “Possibly some biochemical abnormality or other brain changes increase risk. The fact that antidepressants have proven effective in treating some people with sex addiction suggests that this might be the case.”⁵

Just like food or drugs affect the normal functioning of our brain’s survival and reward systems, so does compulsive sex, by fooling the body into producing intense biochemical rewards and thus pleasure, for an otherwise destructive behavior. People struggling with this type of addiction feel euphoria and use sex as a mechanism to avoid feelings of unease, stress at work or personal problems. This is similar to the reasons behind alcohol or drug abuse. Furthermore, all these addictions are linked, they become cross-addictions, since substance abusers can develop sex addiction as a substitute during the absence of drugs.

Research shows that victims of childhood sexual abuse often suffer from PTSD and repeat their abusive patterns in an attempt to gain control over childhood trauma. “Sex addicts often come from dysfunctional families. One study found that 82 percent of sex addicts reported being sexually abused as children. Sex addicts often describe their parents as rigid, distant and uncaring. These

families, including the addicts themselves, are more likely to be substance abusers. One study found that 80 percent of recovering sex addicts report some type of addiction in their families of origin.”⁶

Treating sex addiction

While documenting this article, I found that there are at least five different programs aimed at people with a sex addiction problem, all of which developed in the 1970s: Sexaholics Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Sexual Recovery Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, and Sexual Compulsives Anonymous. To find out more about each, please see [this article](#).

People with sexual obsessions and compulsions often require more than the traditional addiction treatment based on the 12 Step model. Although this is still the norm in sex addiction treatment, participation in a 12-Step program should be backed up by individual and group therapy.

Standard treatment usually includes cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), making use of the goal-setting approach to identify the underlying causes of addiction and achieve small changes. One of the most influential figures in sex addiction treatment is Mississippi-based pioneer [Patrick Carnes](#), PhD, who developed a task-oriented CBT (the “Thirty Task Model”).⁷

There are a few main techniques used by CBT therapists in sex-addiction treatment: they ask patients to face up to their behavior and beliefs about themselves; to make lists of everything they do that they consider “secret, shaming or abusive” to clean their home and work space of all sex-related paraphernalia, from magazines and DVDs to Internet sites; to outline a recovery plan “by pinning down your own <bottom-line> behaviors (other fellowships call these <inner circles>) – what you need *not* to do in order to consider yourself sexually sober.”⁸

Sex addicts often suffer from crippling depression and thus need medication to start tackling the psychological sources of their addiction and embark on the 12 Steps or therapy in the first place. About three-quarters of those in treatment for sex addiction are on anti-depressants.⁹ The beneficial impact of anti-depressants is their libido-reducing side effects, impairing sexual functioning and curbing desire.

Similar to food, gambling or shopping addiction, it is hard to define sexual “sobriety” Generally described as “freedom from all <inappropriate> behaviors but also <progressive victory over lust.>”¹⁰, each individual will have to adopt a personalised definition which will change in time, as treatment progresses.

Sex addiction – not a disorder?

The latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the DSM-5, published by the American Psychiatric Association in May 2013 and considered the bible for diagnosing mental disorders excluded sex addiction as a disorder.

Nicole Prause, a researcher in the department of psychiatry at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA conducted further study which shed more light on understanding hypersexuality as high desire, rather than disorder.

The UCLA release on the study explains: "One way to tease out the difference (between sex addiction and non-pathological, high sexual desire) is to measure the brain's response to sexual-image stimuli in individuals who acknowledge having sexual problems. If they indeed suffer from hypersexuality, or sexual addiction, their brain response to visual sexual stimuli [could be expected to be higher](#), in much the same way that the brains of cocaine addicts have been shown to react to images of the drug in other studies."¹¹

The study, which involved 52 volunteers, lead to different indications. Results suggested that hypersexuality may be caused by having a high libido, rather than by an actual disorder.

Prause commented: "Potentially, this is an important finding. It is the first time scientists have studied the brain responses specifically of people who identify as having hypersexual problems. If our study can be replicated, these findings would represent a major challenge to existing theories of a sex 'addiction.'"¹²

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