



Understanding Hypersexuality or Sexual Addiction:

Pornography and Internet sexual infidelity

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Excessive sexual behavior has been called several things over the years: sexual addiction, sexual compulsion, and the new DSM-5 uses yet another label, Hypersexual Disorder (Kupfer & Regier, 2010). Whatever the name, this condition is often characterized by repetitive sexual fantasies and behaviors, feelings of powerlessness to control one's sexual thoughts and acts, obsessive thoughts about sex, and engaging in destructive sexual thoughts or behaviors even when there is a substantial risk of harm to self or others (Kupfer & Regier). The process of sexual addiction is similar to substance abuse with initial exposure, tolerance, increased use and duration, denial, and rationalization of the behavior (Schaeffer, 2009). An individual suffering from sexual addiction uses excessive masturbation, pornography, anonymous sex, extramarital affairs, or cybersex much like he or she would use a drug, spending a substantial amount of time thinking about, planning for, and taking part in these behaviors (Schaeffer). For this to be a disorder it must interfere with some area of living such as work, friendships or intimate relationships. Sex is often used as a means to avoid or escape personal or professional problems or a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, depression, or boredom (Schaeffer). At some point, the behaviors become completely unmanageable for the person, who repeatedly attempts and fails to lessen or curtail the behaviors. The person may then choose to share their struggles with their partner, or the partner may inadvertently discover the behaviors on their own.

Couples who report sexual addiction as part of their story will experience a different process than those who do not identify one partner as hypersexual. The theory of sexual addiction has been highly debated within the field of psychology. But it is agreed that if sexual behaviors are impacting your marriage, you may need to consult a therapist. A therapist can ascertain where the couple is in the change process. If couples are early in the change process, the emotional impact of the sexual addiction is often much more pronounced, and couples may not have learned the coping skills need to maintain their marriage. On the other hand, if couples have been attempting to change for a long time, both partners may have developed formal or informal supports, which can assist them in dealing with negativity and discussing the problem effectively.

It is very important to assess the couples moral or faith beliefs regarding this topic. Research indicates that the religious values impact treatment for problems with sexual behavior (Hertlein, Weeks, & Gambescia, 2009). Many individuals in sexual addiction treatment have strong religious beliefs about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior, and this should be

respected. For example, many conservative Christian couples view masturbation as a problematic behavior, whereas other individuals do not. Finally, if there are hypersexual behaviors, but the couple does not identify this as a problem, there is a need for an accurate assessment of the frequency and meaning of sexual behaviors for this couple, as well as whether this is known to the partner, while not overemphasizing something which may not be distressing for the couple. However, the focus of this paper is primarily on those couples who identify as being in recovery for sexual addiction.

When assessing sexual addiction, you should consider the following questions, adapted from the Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (SASH, n.d.).

- *Do your sexual behaviors feel “out of control” to you?*
- *What kinds of consequences have you experienced as a result of your sexual behavior?*
- *Are you constantly thinking about sexual things, even when you don't want to?*

Unique Problems for Couples

Sexual addiction often has similar impact on couples as an affair, but the responses are typically heightened due to the long-standing, uncontrollable nature of the sexual behaviors. One individual has repeatedly pursued sexual fulfillment outside of the marriage in some way, which often feels like a betrayal to the partner. In the early stages of change, the hypersexual partner may deny that any infidelity took place, saying “Well, we didn’t have sex, so it wasn’t cheating.” Thus, one partner is saying that behaviors the other partner finds unacceptable (such as cyber relationships, pornography, oral sex, and perhaps even the use of prostitutes) do not represent a violation of their commitments or marriage vows. This is generally very distressing to the other partner, which may be the impetus for couples therapy.

Recovery model. There are three basic stages in recovering from infidelity defined broadly to include any romantic or sexual type of outlet outside of the marriage partner: managing the initial crisis, exploring the context and finding some meaning in the affair, and moving on through forgiveness and strengthening the marriage (Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2008). For sexually addicted couples, the initial crisis is somewhat heightened. Not only is one spouse engaged in sexual fulfillment outside the marriage, but sexual addiction means that these sexual acts occur frequently, secretively and lead to significant problems in living.

Partners typically respond to such violations by questioning the sex addict’s trustworthiness, the safety of the relationship, and the future of their marriage (Gibson, 2008). Typical emotions felt by the partner include anger, shame, depression, abandonment, powerlessness, and victimization (Gibson). The partner’s response will also be impacted greatly by cultural, religious, and social factors which influence their understanding of what this means for their marriage and what behaviors are acceptable within that relationship (Gibson).

The second stage, finding meaning, is a time for understanding relationship factors, external stressors, issues within the sexually addicted partner, and issues within the injured partner (Gibson). The final stage includes assessing the couple’s understanding of forgiveness which includes humility or understanding of the difficult nature of sexuality, empathy for both partners unique experience, and a commitment to move forward without the external sexual outlet.

Similar to other addictions, sexual addiction brings consequences both to the individual engaging in the behavior as well as to their intimate relationships. When beginning to address the problem, the individual recovering from sexual addiction may feel shame stemming from the behaviors and the

inability to make things “right” with his or her partner. Typical concerns of both partners may include finances and sexual intimacy. Conflict may also arise as a consequence of financial decisions made by the individual recovering from sexual addiction. Acting on one’s sexual compulsions often requires substantial expenditures, such as purchasing explicit materials or memberships, paying for services from prostitutes or others, and securing accommodations or buying gifts for liaisons. These expenditures are often hidden from the partner and can be quite extreme. The financial cost of sexual addiction is often significant and far-reaching and can create additional tension within an already distressed relationship.

Often following the disclosure or discovery of sexually addictive behaviors, the couple’s sexual intimacy significantly declines or disappears entirely. It is often easier for both partners to avoid sex rather than deal with emotions surrounding the sexually addictive behaviors and their relationship as a whole. Additionally, the non-sexually addicted partner may feel so much anger, resentment, and hurt that they simply do not wish to have any sexual contact with their partner (Schneider, 1989). Some couples agree to a period of abstinence, during which time both partners will have an opportunity to process their feelings about sexual intimacy without any pressure to actually engage in sexual relations (Schneider). Further, the couple may need to learn how to relate intimately in a nonsexual way and value one another as loving partners rather than as sex objects (Schneider). Increasing the frequency or satisfaction of sexual encounters may be a reason that the couple is trying to change. Successes may lead to relationship improvements and increased commitment to the relationship, leading to a renewed interest in intimacy (Schneider).

Annotated Bibliography: Books and articles to assist in work with sexually addicted couples

For the Couple

- Baucom, D., Snyder, D., & Gordon, K. (2007). *Getting Past the Affair*. New York: Guilford Press.

This book is an excellent for bibliotherapy that will help the couple normalize their feelings and give them a framework for figuring out how they will resolve this issue for their marriage.

- Struthers, William (2010). *Wired for intimacy: How pornography hijacks the male brain*. Downers Grove Ill: Intervaristy Press.

This book explains the biology behind pornography and how it ends up reducing true intimacy and relationship skills, especially focused on the male perspective. This book is also overtly Christian, so it fits with those who hold those beliefs.

- William O’Donahue and Tamara Sbraga (2004). *The sex addiction workbook*. New Harbinger Publications.

This workbook allows for an interactive way of being educated on sexual addiction. This book is not religious in nature.

There are also online “apps” to assist with sexual addiction problems, even if mild problems. Search your phone or computer for current options to assist with tracking desire to use pornography or other sexual content with supports on how to respond in the moment.

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