Understanding and Treating the Signs and Symptoms of Sex Addictions

by ERIC PATTERSON

Understanding What Sex Addiction Is

Achieving and maintaining sexual health may seem like an easy task to accomplish, but actually, the opposite is true. With all of the possible negative situations and stimuli, a person can experience, unhealthy thoughts, feelings, and behaviors revolving around sex are common.

Issues with intimacy, communication, and sexual functioning can each disturb the balance and harmony in someone's life. Sexual addictions can emerge and take over your sexual health.

Some will become addicted to pornography and other sexually explicit content while others will be addicted to masturbation or the act of sex. For these people, sex addiction creates a significantly negative impact which influences all aspects of a person's physical, spiritual, and mental health.

What Is Sexual Health?

Before one can understand the risks and negative aspects of unwanted sexual conditions, it is valuable to understand the goal – sexual health. The World Health Organization (WHO) devised a definition of sexual health based on:

- Being in a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sex and sexuality, which is more than just the absence of an unwanted condition
- A positive and respectful approach to sex, sexuality, and sexual relationships
- Being open to the idea of having mutually pleasurable and safe sexual experiences without fear or violence
- Respect, fulfillment, and safety for all persons involved

A sexually healthy person or relationship will possess various factors that set it apart from the pathological one including similar views on:

- Consent
- Exploitation
- Protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Honest and openness with the other or others in the relationship
- Values and the goals of the relationship
- Pleasure, uncomfortable, and unwanted aspects of relationships

Just like your physical health or mental health, it is important to see your sexual health as something that is fluid and flexible on a regular basis. Just because you have sexual health on a Monday does not mean you will have good sexual health on a Wednesday.

As time, your interests, and your partners desires change, your sexual health changes. People may experience long periods of good sexual health or long periods of poor sexual health, but there will always be fluctuations.

Barriers to Identifying Sexual Health

Identifying healthy sexual relationships is a complex process because the subject comes loaded with preconceived stances based on morality, values, and conservatism. With these principles, people may view nontraditional relationships or sexual behaviors as unhealthy, such as:

- Gay sex
- Polyamory
- Gender or sexual fluidity
- Multiple sexual partners

Of course, many of these views will be nothing more than subjective opinions or long-held beliefs from a bygone era. These differences lead to a multitude of relationships and behaviors being labeled as unhealthy and only a narrow window being dubbed appropriately.

The psychological and medical communities have done little to aid the process of finding sexual health. The American Psychiatric Association (APA), the group that publishes the diagnostic criteria for each mental illness, has been inconsistent over the years with their views on sexual behaviors and if they qualify as mental illness.

In the past, homosexuality was considered a mental illness that should be diagnosed and treated.

Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder

Currently, there is no diagnosis to identify a person as being a sex addict. The APA text covers information about addictions, but these mostly apply to the use of habit-forming substances like drugs and alcohol.

WHO maintains a separate text called the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), which is currently in its 10^{th} version. One of the proposed changes set to take place in the 11^{th} version (ICD-11) is the addition of a new condition called compulsive sexual behavior disorder.

This forthcoming condition will be marked by a persistent inability to control the intense, repetitive sexual impulses that result in sexual behaviors. Compulsive sexual behavior disorder will have signs and symptoms that match substance use disorders and addictions including:

- Neglecting various activities like work, health, and personal care to engage in sexual behaviors
- Unsuccessful attempts to limit or end the sexual behaviors
- Continuing to engage in sexual behavior despite experiencing a number of unwanted effects
- Decreased satisfaction from the sexual behaviors

With these symptoms of compulsive sexual behavior disorder, the behaviors must continue for an extended period – around six months or more. The symptoms must also cause significant distress to the individual or impairment in their ability to function adequately at work, home, school, or social facets of life.

There is an important distinction here – the person’s distress cannot only be due to their moral judgments regarding sexual behaviors. What does this mean?

This division means a person must be distressed by their compulsive sexual behavior, not on the grounds of values or religious beliefs. So, a person who compulsively engages in gay sex cannot carry a diagnosis of compulsive sexual behavior disorder if the distress only comes from fear of being ostracized by their religious family.

It may seem like a minor difference, but it could actually impact the diagnosis of many people exhibiting sexual

behaviors. The compulsive sexual behavior disorder shows how the diagnosis of sexual conditions is still not well-understood in the medical and mental communities.

Next page: Is sexual addiction real? What does sex addiction look like? And more.

What Is an Unwanted Sexual Behavior?

Part of what makes identification and treatment of sexual issues so problematic is the wide range of unwanted sexual behaviors a group can frown upon or endorse. Sometimes even the most innocuous sexual behaviors like masturbation can stir an angry response from a specific group while obviously negative sexual behaviors like pedophilia and rape be encouraged by other groups.

In these situations, it is imperative to have commonsense agreements about appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviors based on notions of consent, exploitation, trust, and honesty. By using these guides, a common list of behaviors could be established to end the guesswork regarding sexual behaviors.

Is Sex Addiction Real and Is It Really a Problem?

The views of sex addiction have been changing rapidly over the past years. Now, claiming a sex addiction is seen as something often done by a powerful male to explain his illegal or unethical behaviors.

By telling people he has a sex addiction, he may hope to garner some sympathy while attending some form of “treatment” in a luxurious environment while the public outrage slowly dies down. In reality, this person may or may not have a sex addiction and may or may not be helped by a period of treatment.

This person may only be exploiting the idea of sex addiction as a way to minimize his damaging and inexcusable actions against other people. Manipulating public opinion makes it harder for other people with genuine concerns to get the help they need when they need it.

The truth is – sexual addiction is real, but it may not look the way you expect it to.

What Is Sexual Addiction and What Does it Look Like?

Not all addictions are easy to identify. In fact, the majority of addictions are unclear and vague as the line between normal functioning and addiction is not always obvious.

Someone smoking crack or injecting heroin will show more obvious signs of addiction as the use of these substances is never expected or acceptable. Plus, use quickly spins out of control to the point where the individual’s entire life is consumed by the drug.

When thinking of sex addiction, it can be helpful to not compare sex to drugs, and instead, compare it to other behavioral addictions. In this example, a sex addiction might be most similar to a food addiction.

People need food to live and sex to continue the human race, and because of this importance, eating and having sex are naturally reinforced behaviors. When you eat, you feel a sense of happiness, relaxation, and satisfaction. When you have sex, you feel the same.

Just because someone is eating or having sex does not mean they are addicted. It only means they are responding in usual ways to rewarding and healthy stimulation.

With addictions to food or sex, the line between healthy and unhealthy behavior is determined by:

- **The frequency.** How often is the behavior happening? Once a month, week, day, or hour? People will have differing points of view, but some level of moderation will be important to maintain balance.

- **The intensity.** How engaged are you in the behavior while it occurs? How much energy and attention are you giving to your actions? Also, how has the intensity of your behavior changed over time?
- **The duration.** How much time do you spend on this behavior each day? If one thing is consuming a significant amount of time and energy, it may become a negative aspect of your life.
- **The risks.** Are bad things happening to you or the loved ones in your life because of your behaviors? Are you feeling physically or mentally ill? Is your behavior interfering with the relationships you hold dear?

The frequency, intensity, and duration of your sexual behaviors are important, but they are not enough to create a sex addiction alone. If you are in an honest and safe agreement with another person or a group of people that involves having sex 20 times per day with the use of bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism (BDSM), it could be healthy, even though it might seem so far out of the norm.

Remember, to some, all homosexual relationships seem bad or wrong because they are outside of the traditional view of sex and relationships. When assessing a sex addiction, it is necessary to leave your preconceived notions at the door.

A sex addict will have an intense mental focus on sex and a powerful drive to have sex when convenient for them without any regard for the needs or concerns for the other people. These sexual behaviors, including masturbation, will make it impossible for the individual to do well and succeed in life because sex will always be the primary concern.

It is impossible to say what causes a sex addiction, but possibilities include:

- Former or current sexual abuse
- Past traumatic life events
- Intense shame and guilt surrounding sex

Like with the causes, sex addiction statistics are equally challenging to estimate. The best guess is that between 7 and 14 million Americans have some type of sex addiction.

Next page: Sexual addiction vs. other mental health concerns, the sexual addiction evaluation process, and treatment for sexual addiction.

Sex Addiction Versus Other Mental Health Concerns

With mental health disorders, there can be a great deal of overlap as some conditions share similar symptoms. You might think anyone with intense sexual behaviors is at risk for a sex addiction, but several other mental illnesses could be a better explanation.

Bipolar disorder is a condition marked by periods of depressive episodes, periods of manic episodes, and periods without mood episodes. During manic episodes, there will be an increase in behaviors focused on feeling good, which makes hypersexuality a cornerstone of bipolar disorder for many.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a condition where people experience intensely intrusive and unwanted thoughts and then feel the need to engage in behavioral compulsions to end the obsessions. Some people will have OCD symptoms that center around sex, sexuality, and masturbation, making it difficult to differentiate from sex addiction.

Personality disorders, including specific diagnoses like borderline personality disorder and histrionic personality disorder, can influence the role of sex and sexuality in a person’s life. These conditions may encourage people to use sex as a way to form, maintain, or end relationships with others.

When looking at sex addiction versus these other mental health conditions, a proper diagnosis and understanding of the symptoms are essential. If a treatment provider misidentifies the cause or the condition affecting the sexual

behaviors, they will pursue a misleading course of treatment that wastes time and resources.

How Is a Sex Addiction Evaluated?

Whether you have a suspected condition that is mental or physical in nature, you need a thorough evaluation from an expert in the field before you can truly know your state. Since sex addiction is often confused for other conditions or denied completely, an accurate assessment is paramount.

An evaluation will look at your relationship with sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation to better understand the interactions. The evaluator will investigate situations including:

- Early memories of sex
- Aspects of the relationship between your parents
- Your perceptions of societal, religious, and family pressures related to sex
- How often you have sex or masturbate and your thoughts and feelings before, during, and after the experience
- The types of sexual acts you participate in and the ones in which you fanaticize about participating
- The response of your loved ones to your sexual activities
- How much you lie and deceive others to maintain your sexual actions
- The presence of other physical or mental health conditions that may influence your sexual interests

Treatment for Sex Addiction

With the sex addiction evaluation completed, the professional will be able to identify your concern and recommend an appropriate level of care to treat the behaviors. Sex addiction treatment may occur in a number of inpatient or outpatient treatment settings.

Many of the headline-making sex addicts report going to a “rehabilitation” to receive their treatment. These rehabs are likely long-term inpatient treatment centers that offer a variety of mental health treatments.

In inpatient treatment centers, the individual will be completely surrounded by trained addiction staff and isolated from their home environment. Many times, they will not have any contact with work, family, or friends for the duration of treatment.

The other main segment of sex addiction treatment is called outpatient. In outpatient, the individual is allowed to live at home, work, go to school, and tend to other responsibilities while participating in some level of treatment on a weekly or daily basis.

Generally, inpatient treatments are more intensive and better suited for people with more significant addictions. Outpatient options can be great for someone with milder symptoms and strong support systems available to them.

Sex addiction treatment options are varied, so it is crucial you find one that frames sex in a realistic and helpful way. Seeking treatment from a facility that practices an “abstinence-only” model or one that sees any nontraditional relationship as deviant might not be very helpful for you.

Many people labeled as sex addicts may not really have a problem with sex. They, instead, might have issues with the judgment and belief systems of other people in their life.

These people would do better to have open discussions with their loved ones to establish expectations of sex moving forward that are mutually beneficial rather than being one-sided. With this understanding in place, there will be a lower risk of shame and doubt on the individual.

Other people will need to focus on ways to have better relationships with their sexual partners. By approaching the relationship from a standpoint of trust, honesty, and respect, there is a lower chance of exploitation and hurt feelings.

Some treatments for sex addiction might seem counterintuitive or just plain wrong, so an open mind will help the process.

Consider a type of sexual interest that is almost universally maligned like pedophilia. Very little success has been had when treating this condition with an “abstinence only” approach, so new research is being done using modern technological achievements like virtual reality and lifelike sex dolls to produce better results and lower risk to real-life children.

Remember, the state and understanding of sex addiction is still in its infancy. Stay openminded and find resources focused on pushing the field forward rather than being stuck in faulty thinking patterns of the past.