

Is it that the incidence of sexual ‘addiction’ is increasing or are people just more willing to acknowledge it now? Unfortunately we have no way of answering that question at present, just an awareness that it’s a concern frequently dealt with by sex therapists. Feeling an urge to engage in sexual behaviour several times a day every day, obsessing about this, not feeling satisfied from any sexual encounter so instantly craving for more are some of the experiences that lead people to self-diagnose sexual addiction. Professionals working in this area are more likely to use the term sexual compulsivity to describe the set of behaviours that make up the destructive cycle of abuse of one’s own and other’s sexuality that some people get caught up in.

Many people enjoy fantasies or lovely memories of special times of frequent, exciting sex. In reality, for most of us there are other parts of life that claim our attention and energy as well. Family needs, work, the many tasks of maintaining a household, keeping up friendships, (other) hobbies: all of these are important life activities that vie for space with sex. Every adult makes choices about which of these they prioritise and how much emotional and physical energy is allocated to each.

For the sex addict, it doesn’t feel like they have much choice. A substantial portion of each day is allocated to sexual activity or at least thinking about it, to the detriment of close relationships, work and family. There may be high levels of arousal but not a lot of pleasure. Sexual activity and orgasm are sought out for relief of anxiety rather than for the joy of sex. And that relief is often only momentary because much compulsive sexual activity actually generates shame, disgust or disappointment and thus the need for further anxiety relief. It’s a vicious cycle that most certainly requires professional help to break.

The first step involves taking responsibility for the out of control behaviour and recognising how destructive it is being. Some people think acknowledging an addiction is all they can do: upturned palms, “I can’t help it, I’m a sex addict.” This is far from the truth. There are three areas that are addressed in treatment once a comprehensive assessment has been completed. First some practical help to gain control over the compulsive sexual behaviours and begin to break the shame cycle. Then therapy can move to looking at the sexual symptoms to identify what it is that triggers them and help the client learn to respond differently. This might require learning about the skills of achieving healthy intimacy. For some people sex has been their only way to connect with another person, their only mechanism of self soothing and comfort, their most effective form of distraction.

The third component of treatment involves addressing the developmental issues. Sometimes harmful experiences during childhood lay the groundwork for the later development of sexual compulsivity. Also, essential aspects of the capacity to be intimate are developed in the earliest days and years of life if. However if childhood experiences don’t adequately meet these needs, that doesn’t have to mean a lack of intimacy forever. We only repeat what has **not** been remembered, reflected upon and worked through. Change is always possible, regardless of age.

For so many people caught up in an addictive sex cycle any kind of closeness is scary. That sounds like a contradiction if you're having sex several times a day but in fact you can have intercourse with someone and never be close to them. You don't need to make eye contact, you don't have to stroke their skin, you may not even know your partner's name. The 'partner' may be on the other side of the world and communicating through the internet. Compulsive sex may not even involve another person. Some people caught in the cycle of sexual addiction are masturbating many times a day. Compulsive sexual activity provides only momentary, often superficial satisfaction before the urge arises all over again.

When sex addicts decide to seek expert help they can break into this vicious cycle and begin to achieve important changes. It's not easy to admit that you have a problem, especially when that involves talking about your sexual behaviour and even more so when you feel ashamed of some of it. Those who have, say the results gained from their hard work are well worth it and that the hardest step of all was picking up the phone.

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