

What is Sexual Dependence/Addiction?

The handout *Sexuality, Just What Are We Talking About?* Explains the meaning of the word sexuality. Sexuality is an important part of who we are and how we live our everyday lives. While most people find that their sexuality is a positive and enjoyable part of who they are, others find themselves drawn into compulsive sexual relationships or behaviours that gradually control their lives and cause them serious problems. Many experts and addicts, alike, talk about the fact that addictive sex is shameful or secret and often abusive. For the addict, sex gradually becomes "a replacement for other things, a convenient act to turn to in times of any kind of need, from escaping boredom to feeling anxious, to being able to go to sleep at night." (from www.sexaddictionhelp.com).

Jeanette Batz, in her article "Strung Out on Sex" writes:

It's not funny. It's not even erotic. Sexual addiction is an obsessive preoccupation and compulsive acting-out that spirals out of control. It happens not in quest of pleasure but because, somewhere along the line the psyche confused sex with love and the body interpreted a rush of adrenaline as a triumph over fear, loneliness and inadequacy.

Sex addicts aren't over-sexed, and they're not people making excuses for deliciously bad behaviour. They're people without any real intimacy in their lives. The sex is a powerfully addictive substitute because, for a few seconds, it fills the emptiness. And that fleeting comfort keeps them coming back for more.

(see www.healthymind.com/s-strung-out.html)

In his book Don't Call It Love Patrick Carnes outlines eleven different patterns of sexual behaviour that characterize sex addiction. These patterns involve behaviours that can be a satisfying and enjoyable part of a person's sexuality, but for some people they lead to 'out of control' behaviour because they are used as a means to relieve some kind of emotional pain. For example, almost everyone thinks about sex and fantasizes about sex. Many people use masturbation as part of a healthy expression of their sexuality, either alone or with a partner. Sex addicts, however, spend a great deal of time "living" in their fantasy life and end up neglecting responsibilities and commitments because of it. They may not have much success with real sexual relationships, but many sex addicts have a very intense sexual relationship with themselves and their fantasies and may masturbate to the point of injury.

Sexual dependency can involve a wide variety of behaviours. Sometimes a person has difficulty with only one unwanted behaviour, sometimes with many. Often the dependency starts with one behaviour or relationship and then progresses over time to increasingly hazardous and/or unsafe behaviours. The result is that the addict's life becomes unmanageable – with consequences like lost relationships, difficulties with work, arrests, financial troubles etc.

The following are case scenarios that could be describing sexually dependent behaviour:

1. A 50-year-old married business executive neglected sales calls when out of town and visited massage parlours and prostitutes, despite knowledge that he was risking HIV infection. He was once an effective salesman, but his work performance suffered because of his sexual pursuits. He took alternate routes on trips in an effort to avoid massage parlours, but he was unable to control his urge to visit these establishments. His wife learned about his sexual activities when he was arrested for soliciting sex from an undercover policewoman posing as a prostitute. At that point, his marriage was in jeopardy, his children and friends were shocked, and his job future was uncertain.
2. A young man talks about the lack of control he feels over his need to masturbate to sexual fantasies. He would go into a trance, go to his room, act out a series of rituals and masturbate. Afterward, he would experience feelings of hopelessness and despair. This behaviour would happen in cycles. Even at work he was not able to keep from masturbating because it was such a sedative for him. Many times, while driving his car, this man would find himself lost in fantasy and secretly masturbating.
3. A young woman repeatedly got involved in multiple relationships with successful, unavailable men. She worked her way through college as a secretary in a building that housed several companies. At one point she had simultaneous affairs with four company executives in that building alone – two of them presidents of their firms, all of them married. This was a recurring pattern in her life.

The last example describes what could actually be considered sex and love addiction. "Sex and love addicts may have several love relationships with different people going on at the same time or...they may have a marriage, complete with home, children and other signs of permanence, but keep returning periodically to one or more former relationships or create secret relationships with new people...sex and love addicts can never find fulfilment and permanence in any of the love relationships they begin." (from www.sexaddictionhelp.com/general.html).

Unlike the person who looks for a relationship and sex as a complement to their life, the love and sex addict looks to something external – a person, relationship or experience – to give them the emotional stability they don't have. S/he uses arousing romantic and/or sexual experiences as a 'fix'. "Just when seemingly "safe" in the rush of a new romantic affair or liaison the troubled love or sex addict grows steadily more unhappy, fearful and bored". (from www.cybersexualaddiction.com/lovept1.php). This person lives in a world of

constant chaos - fearful of being alone or rejected yet pushing their current partner away and perpetually looking for that "special" relationship that will make them happy.

When a person uses love and sexuality as a way to cope, rather than as a way to grow and share, their reasons for choosing someone as a partner are often questionable. Rather than looking for someone who might become a friend or companion, choices are based on how intense the sex life is or how one partner can hook the other into staying in the relationship. A love and sex addict will use seduction, guilt, control and manipulation to attract and keep romantic partners. It is important to note that many people have been involved in a difficult situation or a relationship with a difficult person at some time in their life. For the love and sex addict, however, these situations become the norm.

What About Sexual Dependence on the Internet?

"Engaging in cybersex in a responsible way can broaden your sexual horizons, and if you carry that forward into your face-to-face relationships, it can enrich your sexual experience. . . . If you can bridge the gap between the virtual and the real, it's an incredible tool; if you can't it can become an unhealthy addiction." ([The Joy of Cybersex](#) by Deb Levine)

As with other addictions, Internet addiction to cyber-sex or cyber relationships is about a loss of reality when time, money, emotions and energy are spent on the Internet in a way that feels more and more out of the person's control. "The Internet just happens to provide what sex addicts seek: isolation, anonymity, fantasy material, and a means of hiding the costs frequently associated with buying sexual excitement." (from www.sexaddictionhelp.com)

The addict often creates a 'second life' or an escape "that allows them to forget their problems for the time they spend on-line, much like the numbing sensation alcoholics report when they drink." ([Caught In The Net](#) by Dr. Kimberly Young). Examples of cybersex activities include viewing and/or downloading pornography along with masturbation, reading and writing sexually explicit letters and stories, e-mailing or placing ads to set up personal meetings with someone, visiting sexually oriented chat rooms and engaging in interactive online affairs. Many people allow themselves to get involved in situations which they would never consider in real life, for example; cybersex with adolescents and/or children or presenting themselves as someone of the opposite gender.

Once a person withdraws from their face-to-face relationship, it becomes easier to look for sexual gratification from sources other than his/her partner, and the dependency takes hold. As a person spends more and more time and energy focused on the next Internet connection, they find themselves with an increasing number of problems in many areas of their life. Work suffers or school marks drop

because s/he stays up most of the night involved in a cyber relationship or masturbating to Internet pornography. As with other addictions, patterns of secrecy and lying emerge as the addict tries to hide the problem behaviour. Along with the self-centeredness that eventually dominates the addict's thinking, these issues interact to destroy his/her marriage or intimate relationship.

Warning signs of cybersex dependence include:

- Routinely spending a lot of time on the Internet with the specific purpose of finding cybersex. Often the amount of time spent is longer than originally planned.
- Being pre-occupied with finding sexual partners on-line.
- Frequently using chat rooms or instant messaging to carry out fantasies you wouldn't carry out in real life.
- Looking forward to the sexual arousal or gratification you will get from your next on-line session.
- Frequently moving from cyber sex to phone sex or real life meetings.
- Hiding your on-line activities from your partner. Lying about the extent of your involvement to family members, friends or co-workers.
- Preferring cyber sex over your real-life sexual partner.
- Using the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or to relieve feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression.
- Feeling restless, depressed or irritable when trying to cut down or stop Internet use.

People often get involved in on-line relationships because the people in these relationships can seem so much more accepting than real-life friends and partners (especially if they are hassling the addict about compulsive computer use). The key word is seems. Everyone involved in the on-line relationship could be giving information about themselves that is not even close to the truth. There's really no way of knowing for sure so the whole 'relationship' could be a lie.

Many Internet addicts have learned the hard way that "friendship takes time, effort, face-to-face contact, touching. Intimacy doesn't come gift wrapped in a few well-chosen lines of an e-mail any more than it does through a flowery message printed inside a greeting card. Emptiness can't be effectively or permanently filled through a night of cybersex, or just knowing that 10 other people remember your on-line handle. Your reliance on the faceless community invariably diverts attention from the real issue of being alone or feeling alone. Breaking your Internet addiction means confronting the issues head-on." (Caught in the Net)