

Sexual Addiction

Diagnosing the Syndrome

Some people become addicted to sex. What is the function of the brain in sexual addiction? What ways are there to cope with this addiction and to regain and insure a healthier sexual life?

What Is Sexual Addiction?

Compulsive sexual behavior is an addiction and a problem with control. Healthy sex is a fulfilling expression of affection and love. It provides a channel by which to achieve deeper emotional intimacy. Yet, for some, there's a driving compulsion to engage in sexual activity excessively and harmfully. Sexual addiction gives a destructive turn to normal, life-enhancing activity. Sexually addicted people are unable to control or postpone their sexual feelings and actions. They may go on sexual binges, futilely striving to satisfy an insatiable sexual craving. For some sexual addicts, the pursuit of sex becomes the purpose for living, more important to them than family, friends or profession.

The Brain and Sexual Addiction

The brain responds to and directs major elements of the body's internal system of chemical messages. Sexual arousal ignites central nervous system activity, sparking numerous changes in the body. The expectation of pleasure increases

production of hormones, boosts the heart rate, increases blood pressure and heightens neuronal sensitivity. The metaphorical "chemistry" between two people becomes biochemical in fact, as the chemical phenylethylamine (PEA) appears in the brain. PEA is responsible for the thrill and energy of falling in love and infatuation. Rising levels of this chemical result in intensified excitement and euphoria. Sexual addicts are dependent upon the physical and psychological arousal fostered by constant doses of PEA—the "love drug"—in the brain.

Understanding Sexual Compulsivity

Many sexual addicts experienced abuse or neglect during childhood. As a result, they developed feelings of inadequacy and low self-image. Their parents may have been sexual addicts themselves, and to compensate for their behavioral excesses, may have raised their children with inflexible attitudes regarding sexuality. Sexual compulsion is often accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt and unworthiness. Though sexual experiences may offer a short-term release from these feelings, eventually the addict will again be confronted with shame, blame and self-contempt. Addicts feel powerless to control their behavior.

Characteristics of Sexual Addiction

These symptoms are characteristic of a sexual addict's life experience:

- **Preoccupation**—constantly searching for new sexual prospects
- **Compulsion**—continuing to engage in sexual activity despite harmful consequences and a desire to stop
- **Despair**—guilt or shame over inability to control sexual behavior

Ending Sexual Addiction

The first step toward ending any addiction is to become aware of the problem. When you realize your behavior is out of control, it's time to look at the problems associated with your sexual behavior. These can be financial, emotional and physical.

As a sexual addict, there are steps to be taken to help you overcome feelings of loss or isolation. Since stress sometimes triggers compulsive sexual activity, stress reduction methods are sometimes helpful.

There are several support groups to assist the sexually compulsive individual. Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous and Sex Abusers Anonymous are all organizations qualified to help. These associations can be found in your local telephone directory. Your seeking help can be a very healthy sign.