

Interrupting the Momentum of Sexual Addiction Could Involve Withdrawal Symptoms

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Sexual addiction can be defined as “an ongoing and potentially worsening pattern of compulsive sexual behavior despite awareness of negative consequences on the addict's life”. Sexual addiction involves a compulsion to engage in sexual behavior. Compulsion is defined as an “irresistible impulse”. Sexual addiction, like other addictions, including drug addictions, involves engaging in compulsive behavior long after it has stopped being satisfying. The compulsive sexual behavior is often preceded by a build up of some sort, like pressure or obsessive thoughts. It is often preceded by, or accompanied by “ritualized” behavior and followed by shame, guilt, and remorse. Ritualized behavior is the repeated pattern of behavior that sets the stage for the sexual behavior.

Like drug addicts, sex addicts usually make pledges to themselves or others to quit engaging in the behavior, to cut back, or change preferred acting out behaviors to something less damaging. Yet, despite the negative consequences of the compulsive sexual behavior, it persists. Sexual addiction brings about all kinds of loss, including loss of close relationships, loss of freedom due to legal consequences (i.e. jail), loss of financial security, loss of self-esteem, loss of sense of competence in other areas of your own life, and loss of health. Eventually, many sex addicts awaken to the seriousness of their situation. A crisis or a series of crises produce enough pain to get through enough denial and other defenses that a sex addict becomes willing to seek help for their sexual addiction.

In order to break the momentum of addiction, most sex addicts need to become abstinent from sex for a period of time. Thirty to ninety days of complete abstinence is often recommended. The ultimate goal of sex addiction recovery is not long term abstinence but a return of sexual health. At the beginning of recovery, each addict must define “abstinence” for himself. One’s own definition of abstinence is based on a person’s sexual acting out history. Any sexual behavior that is used for anything but intimacy in a relationship is probably sexual acting out for a sex addiction. Abstinence usually involves masturbation, especially since most sex addicts have masturbation as one of their “sexual drugs of choice”.

In order to break the momentum of addiction and establish abstinence, a sex addict must resist overwhelming urges to act on one's sexual compulsions. Early abstinence skills must be learned and lifestyle changes must be made to encourage and support abstinence.

A sex addict in early recovery, while attempting to abstain from sexual behavior, will often experience “withdrawal symptoms”. Some of these include: irritability, anxiety, mood swings, difficulty focusing or concentrating, depression, lack of energy, cravings, and changes in sleep and appetite. These withdrawal symptoms can disrupt normal functioning in all areas of a person’s life, such as emotional, physical, relationships,

career, etc. Fortunately, if the sex addict resists the urges to act out, these withdrawal symptoms tend to be relatively short lived.

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